

When The World Ends

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When The World Ends

by [skylightsparkle](#)

Summary

Nothing in the world lasts forever. Sometimes the good guys aren't all that good, and sometimes the bad guys aren't quite as dark as they seem. Ash and his friends are about to learn that, in a world that's about to end, all actions come with a consequence and all secrets come with a price. Sequel to The Harbinger of Life.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Prologue



Icy wind added a bitter chill to the air as the blizzard attacked the mountain. Tall, twisted, steep and treacherous, the harsh snow was hardly the greatest challenge that those who dared attempt to brave the mountain would face. Much of the interior of the mountain was hollowed, carved out by the growing strength of the monstrous pokemon that lived there, and it was possible to follow those trails all the way to the summit, though the thought of just flying up seemed almost easier.

The winds raged every single day, thwarting any attempts to approach it with helicopters or planes, and to attempt to fly too high up on a pokemon was pure suicide for both the trainer and the pokemon. The interior was the only way to travel up: a twisted, dark maze of destruction. Viciously powerful pokemon lived there, hardened and trained by the inhabitable environment. Every one of them wanted to make their strength grow, and wouldn't hesitate to challenge anything that they came across, including the rare trainer that attempted to ascend the mountain.

The Nurse Joy who ran the Pokemon Center at the base of the mountain could attest to the damage these creatures had done. Out of everyone who attempted to scale the beast, only a handful of them would make it to the top, and that was over a period of at least ten years.

Some liked to try and train their own pokemon to become just as powerful, but the majority tried to climb the mountain for another reason. Mt. Silver protected its secrets well, but there were always whispers about the real prize at the peak.

The summit of the mountain itself wasn't exactly a peak but more along the lines of a massive plateau amongst jutting, jagged rocks. Within the protective rock walls of the mountain, was a home. It wasn't much, but it was perfect for the owner of it, though very few people saw that. No, when the occasional person finally reached the summit, they were met by a silent, looming figure standing at the opposite end of a massive, deadly battle arena. Despite the icy air whipping around them, whispers said that the figure wore a short sleeved, red and white jacket, jeans, sneakers, and a red hat. Whispers said that the wind would whip his jet black hair into his burning red eyes, but he would never flinch, only begin the battle. Whispers said that he never ever whispered a thing himself.

He was more of a legend than anything else those days. Enough people knew bits and pieces of his story to piece together how this man became the strongest trainer in the world, but no one truly

knew the whole story of the Pokemon Master's rise to power. Strong, untouchable, unknown and silent, Pokemon Master Red was an enigma to all.

It was true, everyone knew the trainer's name, he was officially given the title of the strongest trainer, and officially had the most political power within the Pokemon League. It was a coveted position so people knew of him, but they didn't know him beyond the simplified story that was made public. Nothing was ever simple though.

Only the best of the best got the opportunity to face him. Official battles for the title of the Pokemon Master weren't quite as simple as just climbing Mt. Silver and challenging Red. There were other prerequisites that had to be met first, but people still saw him as a challenge, and if they could reach him, they could challenge him to an unofficial battle.

Few people ever tried to completely scale the mountain though, and even fewer still actually succeeded to face him. He lived in isolation with only his Pokemon for company. They lived a quiet, peaceful life. Or they did, until everything changed.

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"Rai?" Brown ears moved back and fourth as a creature with primarily orange fur perked up. His nose twitched for a moment, smelling the air before his black eyes narrowed, fur standing on end as he growled. He scampered up to the window, glaring at the near white-out conditions outside.

Movement within the small house – created and insulated inside of a massive cavern to protect it from the harsh weather – caused the Raichu to look around, eyes focusing on the tall man who came out of another room. His bright red eyes were narrowed and contemplative.

"Rai raichu?" The pokemon asked, tilting his head with worry.

Red looked down at his ever-loyal pokemon, his expression suddenly determined. He gave no warning, simply summoning his Raichu back into his pokeball before turning around and going back into the room that he had just come from before.

There were monitors lining the walls from hidden cameras that were strategically placed around the mountain to keep track of visitors. Red never liked to be unprepared, but he also didn't want anyone to get hurt. Should someone fail in their journey and be unable to go up or down, he would descend to bring their unconscious forms back to Nurse Joy. Now though, there were many, many people on his monitors, unbothered by the weather conditions or any wild pokemon thanks to the sheer numbers they had.

He had to make his move quickly. He was the Pokemon Master, but even Red knew that he couldn't fight an army, not on his own. Walking over to a strange device that looked like someone stuck a pokeball teleportation machine onto a little black box (which is exactly what it was), he placed five of the six pokeballs he had with him on it, activating the machine and watching as they disappeared, the numbers on the small screen of the box changing to show that they were now within it.

With a flick of his wrist, he threw the sixth pokeball up into the air, revealing a massive, powerful flying-type. Pidgeot stretched out her large wings, focusing on her trainer. The man worked quickly and silently, dismantling the machine and securely strapping a carrier bag onto the pokemon. She stood silently as he put the machine inside, and then slid Pidgeot's own pokeball into the bag.

The pokemon looked at him sadly, and Red placed his hand just over Pidgeot's beak silently. The

flying-type closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again. "Pidgeot ot!"

Red moved over to the computer system that was there, putting in a command before a huge panel slid open, revealing a passage that would bypass any pokemon, any trainers, and the dangerous winds that assaulted the mountain. He was silent as he urged his pokemon to go, and though she hesitated, the Pidgeot still took flight, trusting her trainer. He could have gone with her, but he had little doubt that there were others waiting around the mountain. He would have drawn too much attention, and his only goal was to save his pokemon from a fate worse than death.

Red sighed and went back to the computer, hitting a few more buttons and leaving the room, closing the door behind him. It was only a moment later that an almost deafening crash was heard from in there as the room purposely caved in on itself, completely destroying everything inside.

Then, Red walked towards the table that he had been sitting at before the alerts warned him that there was someone on the mountain. He pulled the bowl of now soggy cereal to him, taking a bite.

The cries of victory and the storming footsteps overpowered the sheer winds, but he paid no mind to it. Nor did he even flinch at the loud bang on his door before it was shattered and the frigid air rushed in. People swarmed in, but he still ignored them, eating his cereal like it was a normal day.

Red only looked up when he was finished, staring blankly as a tall, broad man walked into his apartment. A quick glance around told him that everyone else was clothed in black suits made for the weather, bright red Rs on them. This man was different though. His clothes looked like the best money could afford, and the Persian that strolled leisurely behind him walked proudly, looking at his small home with disdain.

"Master Red," the very familiar man spoke. "You seem quite unconcerned that Team Rocket has taken your sanctuary."

Red cocked an eyebrow at him, everything about his features portraying how uninterested he was in the conversation.

"Boss," a woman spoke up, her twisted blond hair bouncing around her face as she walked towards them. "His pokemon are nowhere to be found."

Giovanni was silent as his dark eyes looked back at Red, contemplating him. "Clever. You knew that we were coming and sent them away, didn't you? Pity your intelligence didn't extend to finding a way to escape yourself." Giovanni waved his hand at the woman. "No matter, our collection of powerful pokemon has expanded exponentially during the expedition up, and from the raid on the Pokemon Center." He paused, looking back at Red. "Pity about the Nurse Joy there though. She put up a fight. I'd give a consolation for her untimely demise, but she is highly replaceable."

Red didn't respond, but his shoulders visibly tensed.

"I heard that you made a vow of unbreakable silence," Giovanni noted. "Though you were never one to talk much when we were younger, were you?" Giovanni spoke as if they were old friends, even if he was older than the man sitting before him. "I'm interested to see how long you can keep this vow with what we have planned. Come now, old friend, I have a front row seat of the events to come saved especially for you. We wouldn't want to be late."

Red looked up at him sternly, never once breaking eye contact as he was swarmed, his arms cuffed behind him as he was herded out of the room by high ranking, Team Rocket grunts. He wouldn't let his worry show, no matter how badly it was plaguing him.

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Flying low in the forest until it was clear of the mountains, Pidgeot raced as quickly as her wings could carry her. Once she was a safe distance away, she soared up high in the sky to ride the air currents that would take her in a south-easterly direction.

She knew where she needed to go, she just hoped that the person she was supposed to deliver her precious package to was still there.



How It Begins

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Hot steam exploded throughout the stadium, blocking the view of the battle below. Already sweaty from the sun beating down on them, Serena pushed her damp, dark blonde hair off of her forehead, tucking the runaway strands back behind her ear.

All around them, people were fanning their faces from the heat and steam. Splashes of chilled water from a vicious battle would have been appreciated, but the hot, wet spray of fire and water clashing was not.

"It's so hot." The small whine came from Bonnie, a young eight-year-old (though she'd be quick to say she that she was turning nine in November) girl with short, platinum blond hair and bright blue eyes.

Serena leaned forward, frowning a little bit as she eyed the sunburn on the bridge of the girl's nose, and the pink tint to her arms. She turned around, digging through her bag to see if she had any sunscreen on her, sighing when she realized it was one of the few things that she left back in the small cabin they had been assigned for the tournament.

From Bonnie's other side, her older brother Clemont groaned and shook his head. "We forgot the sunscreen. Sorry, Bonnie." The brother and sister looked very much alike, even to the point where he had similar pink burns stretching across his skin. Clemont would never complain about himself though, he just wanted something for his sister, and that was something Serena admired a lot.

From his spot between her and Bonnie, their last traveling companion turned to look at the younger girl. Ash Ketchum had been so focused on the battle below, that he hadn't even realized that they were talking about them. His bright brown eyes glanced at the young girl, a slight frown making its way across his features. It was swiftly replaced with a smile as he reached up, pulling his red and white hat off of his head and setting it on hers.

"There," Ash laughed happily. "At least we can keep the sun off your head. I don't need it."

"Thanks," Bonnie beamed at him brightly, pushing the too-big-hat out of her eyes.

"You're lucky, you don't burn." Serena agreed with this assessment. Ash was noticeably more tanned than the three of them at the best of times, but from spending so much time training and battling in the hot, summer sun over the past few weeks, it was even more of a stark contrast.

Ash shrugged a little, still smiling as he turned back to the battle below. His smile waned, lips pressing together as his eyebrows furrowed from concentration. His eyes darted from the battling pokemon, to the trainers that stood on opposite ends of the field below.

A small smile spread across Serena's face. The blonde knew that Ash tended to really get into the battles he was watching, but she had never seen him focus this intensely before. The girl wanted to talk to him, to see what was going on in his head, but she also didn't want to interrupt.

"Alain's going to win," Ash noted as he straightened himself up, wincing as he cracked his back, having been leaning forward for too long.

"I don't know," Clemont responded, shaking his head slightly. "Barbaracle has a double type advantage over Charizard, and Allie has been the favourite from the beginning." He nodded towards the girl donned in grey and purple. Not to mention she blew through most of his pokemon pretty quickly. It's just Charizard that's really been putting up a fight."

"His bond with Charizard is stronger," the raven-haired teenager shrugged his shoulders. "His other pokemon were probably newer than hers, but she won't beat this one. Especially not since he still has his trump card." As he was speaking, Ash ran a tanned finger over a dark, metal band around his wrist, dark grey carvings resting around a clear, multicoloured stone at the center. Serena blinked at the action and looked back down at the battle, squinting her bright blue eyes to see that, sure enough, Alain had an identical object around his wrist.

"Popsicle?"

Serena tilted her head up, raising an eyebrow as she glanced at the very familiar man selling popsicles from a small, portable freezer. "Uhh..."

"We'll take four!" Ash replied excitedly. She looked around at him incredulously. He completely ignored her as he dug through his pockets, fishing for money and paying the man, who moved on to the next isle.

Serena took one of the popsicle, staring at it suspiciously, but none of the other three seemed bothered. She turned around so she was facing Ash better and smacked his arm. "You know that was Team Rocket, right?"

"Yeah." He shrugged a bit. "Doesn't matter. If they're selling stuff, they're not trying to steal stuff, and that works for everyone. Besides," he laughed, "they're not that bad."

She huffed a bit, shaking her head and turning back to the battle, enjoying her icy treat. She wouldn't lie and say that she wasn't enjoying it considering how hot it was, but there were some things that she'd rather not take from people who stalked them all the time. Ash seemed completely at ease with it, so she decided to follow his lead.

"Do you think you can beat him?" Bonnie asked suddenly, watching Charizard lift Barbaracle into the air.

"Well, it won't be easy," Ash admitted. "But I'll give it my all, that's all I can do, right?"

"Coming in second place isn't bad either," Clemont reminded him. "Out of over 200 participants? Coming in the top 16 would be impressive."

"Well, I'm sure you can win." Bonnie nodded her head decisively, the hat bobbing into her eyes again. "We've been training a lot!"

Ash laughed at her, reaching up and ruffling her hair, making the young girl giggle. "That's right, you've been the best battle partner ever!" Ever since they got to the League Village, Ash tended to get up early in the morning and go off to train his pokemon. Bonnie would usually go after him about an hour later and 'help' him train. Serena found them once and saw Pikachu have a battle with Dedenne, though it really looked like it was more for fun than anything else.

"That's really nice of you," Serena noted in a low voice when everyone turned back to the battle. At his curious look, she clarified, "Saying that to Bonnie."

"Oh!" He chuckled and shook his head, pushing back the hair that fell into his eyes. "She really does help. Having fun is just as important and helpful as training is. The best way to do it is make it both." He turned around and looked back towards the battle.

Sometimes Serena didn't know what to make of Ash Ketchum. He could go from a complete goofball one minute to being serious the next without warning. Most of the time he was open to training with everyone even if the rest of them weren't competitive battlers, that way they could all learn together, but sometimes he just vanished, getting a little testy if anyone tried to follow him. Those were the moments where the blonde felt like she didn't know her friend at all.

"So what's next, if you win?" Serena asked him curiously, leaning forward so that her elbows rested on her thighs and her head was in her hands.

"If I win?" Ash repeated, brown eyes scanning the battle below. "If I win, then it's more training to take on the Elite 4 and then Diantha if I can get through them. That's the easy part. Losing though..." He trailed off and shrugged.

"Will you stay in Kalos for a while?"

"Probably not." He glanced at her for quickly. "It doesn't have anything to do with you guys. You could all even come back with me!" Ash grinned at her broadly at the thought. "I just... want to go back home."

"Feeling homesick?" The teenage girl guessed. She was genuinely surprised when his smile fell at her question.

"I guess," his shoulders slumped slightly. "I mean, that might be it, I dunno. I've never really been overly homesick before. I just... want to go home and sleep in my own bed. I want to see all of my pokemon at once. I want my mom's cooking." Ash shrugged and sighed. "So yeah, I guess I'm homesick."

Serena stared down at the battle, thinking about that. She had a lot of fun traveling around Kalos with her three friends and wouldn't trade it for anything, but this adventure was also her first time leaving home. She knew that a lot of people left home or got pokemon when they were ten, but it wasn't something that she had wanted to do at the time. Instead, she went to school and trained for Rhyhorn races. Ash, on the other hand, had left home when he was ten. Given that he was 17 now, that meant that he had been traveling for almost seven years straight, and that was a little bit mind boggling to the blonde.

Cheers erupted from the stadium around them, and Serena joined everyone else in cheering. Alain's Charizard standing over a fainted Barbaracle, an impressive feat considering the pokemon had a double type advantage. He hadn't even used his mega stone.

"Looks like you were right," she said to the taller boy. "Guess you're facing Alain tomorrow."

"Yeah," Ash nodded his head, brown eyes staying focused on his future opponent. His left hand reached to his wrist brushing against the multicoloured stone. "This should be one hell of a battle."

It surprised Serena to hear how calm he was. Ash Ketchum was known for his enthusiasm before battles, especially official ones, yet here he was, just staring down at Alain's Charizard with a thoughtful expression.

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There were some things about Ash Ketchum that boggled people's minds, even he knew that. Things like his lack of common sense or self-preservation were commonly brought up with him to the point where the young man simply ignored those comments. A less common one was how much he could eat without gaining a lot of weight.

Serena stared at him with a strange expression that he knew very well. Being the nice girl that she was, his friend was trying to keep her disgust at how much he was eating, and how quickly he was eating it. She asked about it before, and apparently the excuse that he was a growing boy wasn't good enough.

It didn't matter though. The combination of being hungry and wanting to get through the food quick enough to grab one of the phones in the Pokemon Center drove him. They had been busy since they got there, but a couple of them had opened up and he was eager to get one. The Pokemon Center may have been huge to accommodate all the trainers staying there for the League Tournament, but they still had to limit their resources, and that meant a limited number of phones that had free calling anywhere.

Chugging down the last of his water, Ash slapped the glass onto the table and said, "That was great, guys! I'll be back in a minute!" He got up quickly, slipping and dodging people to get to one of the empty desks.

With a small cheer of success, he sat down and brought up the number pad on the touch screen. It amused him how advanced some things were compared to the big, blocky systems that he remembered seeing in Kanto when he was younger. Ash punched in the familiar number and waited as the call slowly went through. The young man fidgeted in his chair, despising the long but familiar wait.

"Who are you calling?" Bonnie asked curiously as she popped up beside him. "Your mom?"

"No, but I should do that later," Ash laughed a bit. "Maybe tomorrow before my match. It's getting late in Kanto."

The little girl pursed her lips, scrunching her face in thought. Her expression shifted quickly, eyes going wide and a big, teasing smile appearing on her face. "Are you calling your girlfriend?"

Ash chuckled and was going to answer her when the phone finally started ringing. Quickly, he turned to face the screen, waiting for a moment before it flickered to life. His smile faded, replaced with confusion when he saw who it was that answered. Rarely ever did Misty get there first, Daisy and Lily were a lot faster to get to the phone, but given that she hadn't been in Cerulean City much over the past year or so, only stopping in for a couple days at Christmas, the trainer was a bit perplexed at the fact that Violet was the one to answered.

The young woman in question actually looked a little cranky until she realized who she was talking

to. Her dark brown eyes went wide and she beamed at him, "Hey Ash! Long time no see!"

"Yeah," he spoke slowly. "I thought you were still in Unova with Brad." Brad Filmore was Violet's long-time boyfriend. The young man was a movie star from Unova, whom he had the chance to meet while traveling with Iris and Cilan. Not only that, but the three of them were able to get very small roles in a film that the man was acting in and producing.

"Oh I was, I just got in this morning." She waved her hand at him. "Did Misty tell you the exciting news yet?"

"I didn't get the chance to talk to her," he admitted, looking over towards his friends. Bonnie retreated back to the table, and now they were all watching him with interest. He looked back at the phone. "I'd like to though."

"Well she's not here," Violet shook her head, indigo hair flowing with the subtle movement. "She's actually on her way to your mom's house. Had to leave late. You could probably try her cell. You have the number, right?"

"Course I do." Ash hated talking to Misty on her cellphone, partially because he couldn't actually see her, but mostly because it could be hard to hear at times. "Guess I'll give that a try."

"Not just yet! I'm going to tell you the good news!" He watched with a bit of amusement as the young woman stood up and turned sideways, pulling her shirt tight around her. When she did, Ash's mouth actually dropped when he saw the fact that her stomach definitely wasn't flat anymore. Violet turned back around and sat down, grinning broadly. "Brad and I are having a baby! In four months, so you gotta get a good gift for her, okay? You're the only 'cool' uncle she's going to have so yeah, it has to be good."

"What?" He was completely flabbergasted.

"Brad's an only child, and it certainly won't be Tracey or Huey." Misty's sister rolled her eyes at the mention of the man that Lily was seeing. A man that was a lot older than her. "So that leaves you."

"Um, I'm pretty sure that's not how it works. Misty's its aunt yeah but I'm not—."

"Details." Violet waved him off again before pointing at the screen. "You're in Kalos, you should be able to find something good. Now you run along and call Misty. Have a nice night." She hung up, leaving Ash staring at the screen blankly for a moment. He always felt like he got hit with a steam roller after dealing with any of the Waterflower sisters.

"You okay?" Leaning back, he glanced up at Serena, who regarded him with worry.

"Fine." Despite his words Ash shook his head. "Just questioning my future."

"Who was that? The blue-haired girl?"

"On the phone?" She nodded, her expression guarded. "That was Violet, one of Misty's sisters. Apparently she's having a baby and I have to buy presents." Ash rolled his eyes before turning back to the phone and typing in another number that he knew off the top of his head.

"Oh." Though she was never nasty or mean, Serena always sounded a bit put off whenever Ash mentioned Misty. He knew why, it wasn't that hard to figure out (well, it wasn't hard for Bonnie to bluntly point it out to him), and Ash was just glad that his friend was mature about the whole thing. She still smiled and said, "That's good for her!" The words were awkward, but the sentiment was still genuine.

The call finally went through and he picked up the handset that was there, knowing there'd be no point in using the screen. It was always easier to hear this way. Ash watched Serena get up and walk away, her posture a bit rigid, but he knew that there was absolutely nothing he could say to make her feel better.

"Hello?" Instantly Ash was pulled out of his musings by the very familiar, albeit sleepy, voice.

He instantly lit up, a involuntary smile appearing on his face. "Hey!"

"Ash?" Misty's voice perked up a bit. "Hey, what are you up to?"

"I got whiplash from one of your sisters again," the young man sighed dramatically into the microphone on the handset. "Violet this time. Haven't had that happen in a while."

"She told you, didn't she? Damn her, I wanted to tell you." The bitterness in her voice actually made Ash smile. It was Violet's news to share, but of course Misty would want to be the one to break his brain. "So, I didn't get to see earlier, who are you going up against?"

"Alain. He has a Mega Ring like I do. For his Charizard, I'm pretty sure." He lowered his voice a bit, bright brown eyes darting around. "I really think I can do it this time. I think I can win." She was saying something, but her voice was overpowered by a blaring sound of a train's whistle. "What the hell? Where are you?"

"Sorry," she apologized. "I'm taking the train to your mom but had to switch. We're going to watch your match together. I was asking what you were going to do after that."

"Yeah, Serena asked me that earlier too," Ash shrugged, even though she couldn't see it. "Try to defeat the Elite 4 and Diantha. If I do, well then we'll see. If not, go home."

"Then off to the next league, right?" Misty laughed a bit, and the honest sound made something painful rush through him. Ash's shoulders slumped a bit and he leaned against the desk the phone was on.

"I'm excited for this, I really am."

"...But?"

"But," he conceded, "I just...I just want to go home and sleep in my own bed for a while, you know? I want to be able to jump on the train and visit you. I just...I love exploring but...I dunno how to explain it. I guess I'm homesick. That's what the others said earlier. I dunno."

"Aw, you just miss me," Misty teased him.

Ash rolled his eyes and intended on arguing with her, that was just what they did, but his voice caught in his throat. After a moment of silence he said, "Yeah, I do. I miss you, I miss mom, I miss all my pokemon." Twisting around so that his back was leaning against the desk, he stared at his three friends, who were looking at a piece of paper on the table with excitement. "Do you ever feel like... like you know you have to pick something but you don't know what you're picking or when or why, you just know you have to?"

"Is this Chosen One stuff again?"

"No," he admitted almost sheepishly, "not this time. I just mean... me in general. Have you ever felt like that? Cause it's making my brain want to... to blow up or something."

"Well, I think I know what you're talking about," the young woman's voice didn't sound entirely certain. "Just... take things one step at a time, okay? You have a match to get ready for. Just focus on that for now and we'll try to work out the rest later, alright?"

Though her answer was vague, that actually did help Ash a bit. Then again, over the years he realized that relying on others rather than trying to do everything himself helped a lot with most things. "Yeah, I can do that. You probably gotta go, right?"

"I wish I could talk more, but it's getting hard to hear." Her voice was coming out a little more scratchy, and it sounded busy on her end. "I'll talk to you tomorrow though, face to face, alright?"

"Yeah!" If there was one thing Delia Ketchum always made sure was up to date, it was the phone in her house. "I'll call you right after my match is done! Or maybe right before. One of them!"

"Alright," Misty laughed. "See you soon. Love you."

"Love you." The words escaped him instinctively, but he meant it too. It wasn't the first time that they said that, but it still meant a lot.

Ash sighed and hung up the phone, sitting there for a moment before he got up and stretched out his arms. It was still early in the evening, but he really just wanted to get some sleep so he could get up early with his pokemon. After all, in less than 24 hours, he would be fighting Alain for the title of Kalos Tournament Champion. After that, who knew?

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Sea-green eyes narrowed dangerously as her hand grasped the phone so tightly that it started to shake. Staring at the flat screen of the monitor in front of her, her cheeks red and her lips pulled into a scowl, she was the pure picture thinly controlled rage.

"What do you mean the filter just broke," she growled, keeping her voice low so that she wouldn't attract attention.

"Oh, well you see," the young woman twirled her perfectly styled blond hair around her finger, "it happened during a battle and—."

"Arceus damn it, Daisy!" She smacked her free hand on the table in front of her. "It was fine when I left." There was a beeping that made her frown. "What was that?"

Daisy Waterflower scowled at her younger sister, their expression so much alike that it was slightly terrifying. She narrowed her own sea-green eyes at her and said, "It was a tough battle, alright? Dewgong completely destroyed that stupid kid's Victreebel." She tilted her head up defiantly. "I thought you'd be happy to see how well I'm doing. By the league rules, I'm exactly where our gym has to be, so like, chill." There were a few more beeps. "And that's the other line. Lily! Violet! Someone get that!"

"Got it!" Violet's voice rang out from somewhere else as she rushed to get the second line.

Misty muttered a curse that made her older sister laugh.

"Look," Daisy said, her voice smoothly transitioning from annoyed to upbeat. "I got things here. The inspector's coming over while you're gone to reinstate me as the main Gym Leader, and I'm going to blow him away. I'll get Tracey to come and look at the filter in a few days. I just wanted you to know why all of Ash's pokemon got sent back to Professor Oak." A sly grin appeared on her face. "Speaking of – are you there yet?"

"No," she sighed, looking over her shoulder at the large clock in the wall. "I've got to go in a few minutes though to make the train."

"You got to see the prelims though, right?" Her eyes went wide. "I looked it up and wow, that punk-kid improved."

An amused smile appeared on Misty's face as she shook his head. "Punk-kid? You like when he comes to visit. And you like talking to him."

"Well, yeah, he'll do almost anything for us," Daisy waved her hand. "Free labour." Her eyes went wide and she excitedly asked, "You gonna tell him about Vi?"

"Once I wrap my head around it," she shook her head, scowling a bit as her long ponytail brushed into her eyes. She pushed it out of the way and then asked, "Who doesn't tell her sisters that she's pregnant until she's four...five months? Whatever she is. Who does that?"

Daisy just shrugged, and Misty knew that her older sister completely agreed with her. Finding out that Violet was pregnant was shocking. Finding out that she had known for a while blew all of their minds. She had been in Unova with her boyfriend, film star Brad Filmore for a while and didn't bother to mention anything when she called.

Pulling Misty out of her silent musing, a voice called out, "The train's coming, Misty!"

"Coming!" She called back before turning her attention to Daisy. "Don't break anything else. Good luck with the inspector though."

"Who needs luck when they have pure talent?" Daisy asked, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "Remember, you promised to go to that jewelry shop when you get back there after the tournament to send me ring ideas so I can show Tracey what to get me when he proposes. Have fun, baby sister, but not too much fun." She winked at her before hanging up the phone, not even waiting for Misty to reply.

Shaking her head, the young woman stood up grabbing her blue pack and tossing it over her shoulders, hurrying to meet the woman she was traveling with. Though her hair colour didn't particularly stand out, it was very easy to find Delia Ketchum in this large crowd. The woman was practically bouncing, her bright brown eyes glittering with an excitement that Misty had only ever seen in the woman's son.

"Good, I was hoping I wouldn't have to yell at the conductor to wait for you," Delia said cheerfully. Though generally a perky, upbeat woman, she was absolutely terrifying when she got mad and there was little doubt in Misty's mind that the conductor would have made the train wait rather than face Delia Ketchum's wrath. "How's your sister?"

"Just being my sister," Misty sighed, but then perked up, smiling widely. "Thank you for inviting me to come with you, Delia."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to thank me?" the woman laughed as a train came to a stop in front of them. They moved away from the doors, waiting for the people to step off of it. "I couldn't imagine coming here without you! Oh, Ash is going to be so excited to see you!"

"And you," Misty laughed, yawning a bit afterwards. "He's such a mama's boy." It was true. Misty just knew that even if Ash's father would have been a part of his life, he still would have been a very proud mama's boy. He never even tried to deny it anymore.

Misty honestly adored that side of him; the side that would see a trinket in the market that didn't

cost half the amount it would be to ship it back to his mother, but he still got it just because he wanted to. At first glance, most people didn't see much of a resemblance between Delia Ketchum and her only son, and it was true that, where she was pale with auburn hair, her son had a rich tan and locks as dark as night. Misty knew better than that though. Their eyes were the same bright brown that could never hide their true emotions, and it was painfully obvious that Ash inherited his mother's smile. More than anything, it was the limitless kindness, the excitement, and their sheer bravery that were echoes of one another. Maybe Ash didn't look much like his mother, but he was, without a doubt, her son.

Her own mother died when she was very young, her grandmother just a few months before she left home on her journey, so Delia Ketchum had become a surrogate mother of hers, even before she began dating Ash. In fact, that didn't alter the way Delia treated her in the least. The woman didn't just open her arms and let her in the family, she clutched on and dragged her in without any questions. Then again, it was like that for most of the close friends that Ash brought home. Like her son had demonstrated so many times, Delia Ketchum had a big heart.

The young woman's phone rang, and she answered it without looking at the caller ID. Dreading it being her sisters again, her voice ended up coming out sounding exhausted. "Hello?"

"Hey!"

Misty's eyes went wide. "Ash?" She looked towards Delia, who smiled and shook her head at the younger woman's excitement. "Hey, what are you up to?"

Talking to her boyfriend proved to be a great way to pass the time, before climbing onto the train. Misty followed Delia until they found a comfortable compartment to sit in for the rest of the trip. The plane ride left her exhausted, and though the train ride wouldn't be that long, it was still a little too long in the redhead's books.

Desperately trying not to ruin the surprise, Misty reluctantly managed to hang up, faking her phone losing a signal. She leaned back and stared at Delia. "He has no idea we're in Kalos."

"Of course he doesn't," the brunette laughed merrily. "He's going to be so excited. A bit confused – bless his heart – but I just know he'll be bouncing off the walls. It's been months since you've seen each other, right?"

Misty nodded her head. "Since the winter holidays, the same as you. Actually, I got to see him off at the airport, so it's been longer for you."

Delia laughed cheerfully at her and patted her shoulder. "Yes, but I'm his mother. That's different. I remember there were moments when I was excited to see Jack again, even over my own father. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Misty blinked at her curiously. She knew the name Jack Ketchum belonged to Ash's absent father and Delia's husband. She never thought much about him, because Ash never seemed to care. There wasn't a single picture of him around the Ketchum residence, and sometimes the young woman wondered if any existed at all. She didn't have a high opinion of someone that could so easily abandon his family to chase after pokemon – never even bothering to keep in touch. Gary dared to try and imply that Ash was like that once, but Misty was quick to shut up him. Though he loved to travel, Ash always kept in touch and would never just up and leave any of his friends.

The only thing she didn't like about him journeying to places that were farther away was the fact that she couldn't meet up with him like she did every couple months when he was in Sinnoh. The flights to Unova and Kalos were much too costly, and he was almost literally half way around the

world, so the time zones were very different. Still, she'd never stop him from trying to reach his dreams, just like he'd never stop her.

"Seriously, Delia," Misty said happily as she relaxed in the seat. "I never would have been able to afford to come here on my own, so thank you."

"Oh it's no problem," Delia winked at her. "It would be lonely traveling alone anyway, and sometimes Samuel – bless his heart – starts talking gibberish on me."

Misty laughed at her and then turned her attention out the window, watching as the tall, Lumiose Tower that also housed the gym faded from view. Misty always wanted to come to Kalos since she was only little, and she knew for a fact that she talked about it more than a few times while on the road with Ash and Brock. The former teased her about getting to go when she didn't more than once.

She would have loved to explore Lumiose City more, but in order to make it on time for Ash's match tomorrow, they needed to leave now. Maybe she could convince him to show her around Lumiose afterwards – unless he was preparing to face the Elite 4. Then she'd just help him train.

She snuggled down in her seat, fixing her yellow, peasant top. They were taking a late train, and would be getting to their hotel fairly late in the evening, but Misty wanted to rest now so she could check out all the festivities that were happening, and hopefully surprise her boyfriend.

The young woman didn't mean to nod off for the entire trip. A small shake of her shoulder caused her to blink open her eyes and stare up at Delia, whose shoulder she was leaning on, with confusion.

"We're here," the woman said cheerfully.

"We are?" Misty sat up straight, looking out the window. There was what looked like a massive castle in the distance – where the Elite 4 and Champion held their battles. The town around it was lit up brightly with activity. Her eyes widened with excitement until she saw her reflection in the window.

She tugged her bright orange hair out of the elastic, brushing it with her fingers and smoothing it as much as she could before gathering it at the top of her head into her normal, side ponytail. She scowled at her reflection a little bit, not liking the way her longer hair would sometimes drape into her eyes. Her sisters pouted about her wanting to tie her hair up in anyway that wasn't perfectly styled, but they learned to back off and let her do what she wanted. Maybe she'd actually let them help her figure out something else so it would stop annoying her. There was nothing she could do about it now, so once she was semi-satisfied, she gathered her bag up, waiting for the train to come to a stop.

Misty wasn't a vain girl by any means – and only found dressing up to be enjoyable when it was on special occasions. She didn't want to have to worry about makeup running if she needed to dive into the water, and she certainly wasn't going to wear a dress or a skirt if she was traveling. Instead, she wore her simple yellow shirt, bright blue jean shorts and plain red sneakers.

Vanity or not, she didn't want to meet up with her boyfriend for the first time in over six months looking like a slob. Not in public, at least. She could care less what she looked like just lounging around in the house, no matter who was there.

She followed Delia off of the train, grabbing onto the older woman's arm so that they wouldn't get separated in the massive crowd that was moving in all directions.

"Which way to we go?" Misty called out to Delia over the loud chatter of the people around them.

"This way, I think," Delia replied, tugging her along with her. It was a bit of a struggle, but they managed to get through all of the people, finally reaching the road where they waited for a taxi.

"It's beautiful here, even if it's busy," the younger of the two women commented, taking in everything that she could.

"It is. I always wanted to come to Kalos with Jack, but that was impossible once Ash came along." Delia smiled brightly, no doubt at some memory of Ash from when he was a baby.

"Well, you're here now," Misty said after a moment, briefly wondering why the woman kept bringing up her estranged husband. It was rare for her to bring him up at all, let alone twice in only a few hours.

"Exactly," Delia replied cheerfully. "It was all worth it." There was absolutely no doubting that Mrs. Ketchum loved her son.

A flash of red out of the corner of her eye caught Misty's attention. She looked around, brow furrowing. She would have sworn that there was someone watching them, but now she didn't see anyone. Shaking her head, she decided to shrug it off. There were a lot of people around, so someone looking at them wasn't that strange.

"Here we are," Delia quipped cheerfully as a cab finally pulled up in front of them. They got into the back, and Delia smiled at the driver. "Hotel Royal Kyogre, please."

"Right away," the cabbie replied before sliding the window shut between them.

Misty was digging through her purse, searching for her cellphone again. As she dug, a sweet smell assaulted her, something that was very familiar.

The water-type trainer looked up, and though it was faint, she still saw a pale blue shimmer that made her heart stop for a moment. "Sleep Powder."

She slammed her hand into the plexiglass, startling Delia, and yelled, "What are you doing?"

The man looked in the rear-view mirror, and Misty felt her stomach drop. She didn't recognize the dark, careless eyes that were staring back at her, but she did recognize the barely visible red R on his hat. "Team Rocket."

The man just smirked and turned his attention back to the road. Misty lifted her hand to bash it against the plexiglass that separated them from him, but it was too hard to move her heavy hand as the Sleep Powder settled in. She slumped back against Delia, and lost consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

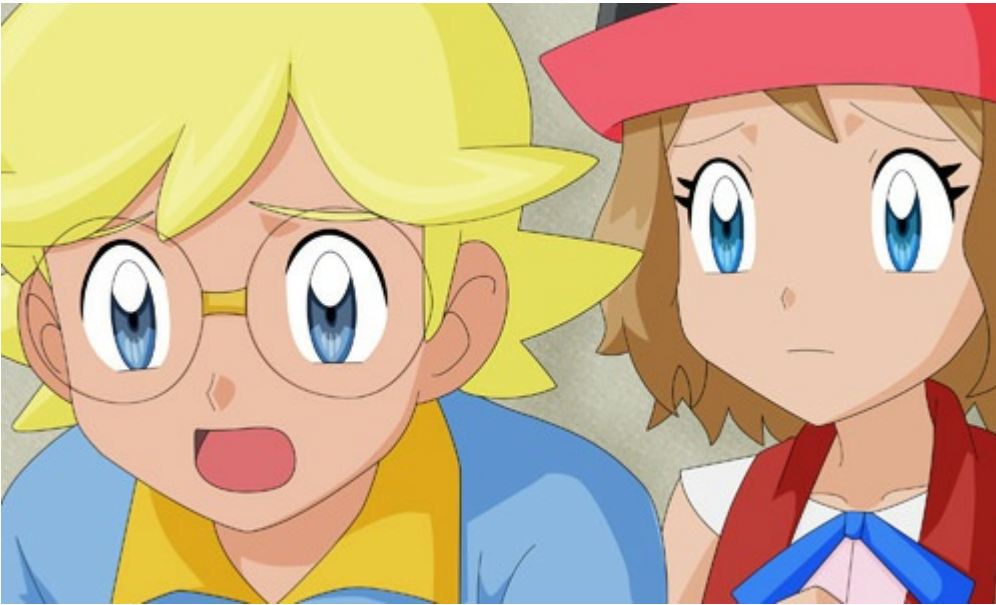
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Wake Up Call

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



There was absolutely no denying the fact that Ash had been a nervous wreck when he entered his first league tournament. Walking into the stadium and realizing just how many trainers there were with years of experience over him made his stomach twist in very unpleasant ways at the time. It honestly never occurred to him that 11 was a very early age to participate in a league tournament, though Gary and Ritchie too had been there too. He cried after he lost his match to Ritchie, feeling like an idiot even though, in retrospect, Ash realized something was off about the entire match. During his other league tournaments, he saw them delay matches when emergencies came up, but not his.

Still, coming in the top 16 was nothing to shake a stick at, especially for an 11-year-old. That was the first and last time he felt that nervous for a league battle. Instead, he started channeling all that negativity into excitement. The only unfortunate side-effect of this was the fact that it made it very hard to sleep the night before.

The teenager tossed and turned all night long, glad that all of his pokemon were with Nurse Joy instead. Pikachu would have been up with him the whole time, and his friend needed his rest for the battle that day. Ash did too, but not nearly as much as the pokemon.

It was strange though. Ash couldn't remember feeling this restless before. It was like there was something at the back of his mind that was trying to get his attention, but for the life of him, he had no idea what it was. The young man decided that it probably had to do with the fact that this was the final match in the tournament and it was the first time he participated in one. He was quite proud of himself as it was, especially after nearly falling on his face in Unova. If it wasn't for Ria and Pikachu, he probably would have come in eighth place or something like that, rather than scraping through to the semi-finals before losing.

Ash shook his head and looked at the digital clock that was in the room and groaning a bit. It was early in the morning, but there was no way he could keep lying there, letting his thoughts get the best of him. There was a lot to do that day too. He had to go get his pokemon and run through a couple last minute things with them. His battle didn't start until two o'clock, but the brown-eyed

boy needed to do something with his time or he'd go stir crazy.

Rolling out of the small bed that he claimed in their tiny cabin, he looked over at the second one in the room as Clemont snorted, rolling over and covering his head with the blankets. Ash shook her head, an amused smile playing on his lips as he gathered up the jeans and black t-shirt with white sleeves that he intended on wearing that day. He headed to the bathroom that was beside their room so that he could get a shower in an attempt to both wake himself up and feel a little better.

Ash could feel himself becoming more excited with the prospect of actually battling Alain. He just knew that he could do it this time. Coming in second wouldn't be bad, but he really did want to win this time around. Once he was clean with the clothes he brought with him tossed on, Ash tried to silently sneak back into his room to leave the dirty items there, while trying to find the rest of his stuff. He grabbed his blue, short sleeved shirt, zipping it up over his other shirt, and searching around for where he tossed his socks, gloves, belt and hat before he passed out the night before. Finding most of it was easy enough, but one of his gloves was nowhere in sight.

"What time is it?" A tired voice asked him.

Ash peaked up from where he was kneeling on the floor, meeting Clemont's blue eyes. His friend was a bit unfocused without his glasses as it was, but add in the fact that he still seemed exhausted, and he really wasn't all there.

"Early," Ash replied as he finally found his second, elusive glove, pulling it over his left hand. "You got more time to sleep. I'm going to go check up on my pokemon."

Clemont waved to him, promptly burying his face into the pillow. The raven-haired boy chuckled a little bit and shook his head as he left the room.

Like most places that held a yearly conference, there were small cottages that they gave to trainers and their families to use while competing. There wasn't much to them really, two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a small combination of a living room and kitchenette, not really big enough to actually make much food with a small confection oven, a mini fridge and a microwave.

That didn't stop Serena though. He raised an eyebrow when he saw the girl flittering around the kitchen, her Delphox standing beside her, watching with amusement. Something smelled really good, and Ash had to admit that he was very tempted to try and snatch whatever it was. Delphox would know what he was up to though, meaning that Serena would know what he was up to, and she was really good at protecting whatever baked treats she made, able to accurately smack his hand away from them without even looking.

She turned around with a bowl of mixed ingredients in hand and let out a surprised squeak when she saw him, blushing madly as she splashed some of the mix onto her pink apron. "Ash! Don't sneak up like that!"

"Sorry," he laughed, holding his hands up in the air as a sign for surrender. "I didn't think you'd be up this early."

She set the bowl down on the counter beside her, tugging at the small ponytail that she had pulled her short hair back into. Then she put a hand on her hip and glared at him playfully, "I'm excited! You can't tell me you're not excited!"

"Yeah. I'm going to go get my pokemon now."

"Oh!" Her bright blue eyes went wide. "I'll come with you!"

"You're baking things," Ash waved his hand. "I'm sure they'll all like some when we get back, so you stay here. Can't have the whole place burning down with Clemont and Bonnie still asleep, right?"

"Alright then," she replied cheerfully as she went back to baking. "Bonnie will probably follow you there later though." That much was true. Ash usually did go to the Pokemon Center first thing in the morning, and the young girl eventually came barreling after him with whatever treat Serena had made.

Ash shook his head with amusement as he walked out the door, stretching in the early morning sunlight. There weren't nearly as many trainers up that day as in the past little while, but then again, many left after losing their battles, and those that did stay to watch the championship match had no reason to be up early.

He trudged to the Pokemon Center – a massive and up-to-date one that could service the many trainers that came through every single day. One of the many Nurse Joys that were working there smiled warmly, recognizing him.

"Hello Ash," she said cheerfully. "Your pokemon are all rested up and ready to go for your battle today. If you give me a moment, I'll go get them."

Ash nodded his head, leaning against the desk and watching the news as he waited. It was Conference season, starting with the Indigo League Conference back at the beginning of May, so there was always something interesting on. Newly crowned tournament champions waving excitedly, people preparing to take on the Elite 4. People failing to beat them. There hadn't been a newly crowned champion yet this year. Then again, there hadn't been one in years, the newest ones being Wallace from Hoenn and Cynthia from Sinnoh, and even both of them had been around a while now. Some critics said that his generation was generally talentless, but that just made Ash bitter. He knew so many amazing trainers that deserved so much recognition, not scorn to discourage them before they could keep going.

On the television Master Lance, the Champion of both Kanto and Johto, stood before the crowd, talking animatedly about how he wished the competitors next year better luck. The person who won the Indigo League hadn't even made it through one Elite Four member. Ash watched with interest before a voice startled him. "He's been Champion for a long time, hasn't he?"

Ash looked around, a bit surprised to see Alain standing beside him. Despite the fact that they would be squaring off later today for the title of Tournament Champion, Ash felt no bitterness towards him. In fact, he was relatively glad to see him beforehand. Remembering his question, Ash nodded. "Lance has been the Champion since before I was born."

"Huh. And you're what? Sixteen?"

"Seventeen," Ash corrected.

"Over seventeen years. That's a long time to be in power. Though he lost it to Master Red for a few years, right?" Alain's brow furrowed with thought.

"Yeah. Master Red was the youngest Champion in history. I think he won when he was 15 or something like that." Ash shrugged. He knew for a fact that Red had been 15 when he became the Indigo Champion, the man was his idol after all. "While Red was the Champion of Kanto, Lance became the Champion of Johto, but Red became the Master the year I was born, so Lance got that title back too. I don't think he's that much older than Red though." Both Red and Lance were something of heroes to Ash growing up.

"He definitely doesn't look it. I would have pegged him for late twenties or early thirties." Alain shrugged a bit.

"Mr. Ketchum?" Nurse Joy spoke up as she returned with five pokeballs, and a smiling yellow creature.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu jumped up onto his shoulder, nuzzling against his face.

Ash forgot about Alain for a moment, laughing as he stroked Pikachu's soft fur. "You had a good rest?"

"Chaa!"

"Giving away one of your choices already?" Alain broke in, a tone of amusement in his voice.

"I'm sure you were expecting it anyway," Ash quipped back as he grabbed his other pokeballs and attached them to his belt. "Doesn't matter, I can still beat you."

Alain smirked at him and pushed off the desk. "We'll see." He tapped the Mega Ring around his wrist and then walked away.

Ash looked down at his and then back at Alain's retreating figure, feeling a strange twist of emotions. On one hand, he was almost twitching with anticipating for the upcoming battle, but that nagging feeling from the back of his mind was back again, trying to tell him that something was wrong.

There wasn't much he could do about the feeling, except pray that a legendary pokemon wouldn't come bursting through the walls of the Pokemon Center, demanding his help for something. That really wasn't an option at the moment. Ash decided that he'd just focus on the upcoming battle, and whatever happened after that would come later.

"Serena's baking," Ash said to Pikachu, who's face lit up. "What do you think, wanna head back?"

"Chaa," his pokemon cooed happily.

Ash laughed and was about to walk out of the sliding doors when Nurse Joy called out to him. "Mr. Ketchum?"

"Yeah?"

She smiled at him brightly. "Good luck."

He stared dumbly before returning the smile and raising his hand into the air. "We'll do our best, right buddy?"

"Pi pika!" Pikachu mimicked the motion.

Feeling slightly more uplifted, Ash walked out of the Pokemon Center, stopping to take in the Trainer Village that surrounded the stadiums. He loved places like this, seeing all the people who were so dedicated to their pokemon and their friends. There was so much positive energy there that it made him almost hyper.

Many trainers left after they lost their battles, and it was still very early in the morning, so there was really no one else around. That would explain why no one else reacted to a scream of terror. Ash whipped around, looking in the direction of the sound as Pikachu's fur stood on end. It was

familiar, putting him on edge and forcing him take off around the corner.

He had always been a fast runner, never losing the boundless energy that he had since he was an overly hyperactive child that should have made his young mother go grey by now. Something was wrong, really wrong. Trusting his instincts, Ash tucked his mega ring into his glove, though he couldn't quite say why at the time. He rounded the corner, his brown eyes going wide with horror when he saw two men holding a struggling blonde girl.

"Bonnie!" Anger coursed through him and he took a few steps forward, but the man holding her actually held a gun to the girl's head. Her eyes brimmed with tears, but she was trying to keep a brave face. On the ground not far from her were a couple of crushed cupcakes and Ash mentally cursed. Bonnie always met him at the Pokemon Center, no matter what time he seemed to get up.

"I just wanted to come to the Pokemon Center with you," she said, her voice shaking.

"It's okay." Ash could sense another person walking behind him, but didn't acknowledge their presence, keeping eye contact with the man holding the young girl. "Let her go."

"Pika!" Pikachu jumped on the ground, his cheeks sparking dangerously.

"Put the rat in its pokeball first. Or I'll put a round of steel in this little cupcake's skull." The man squeezed Bonnie and the other laughed cruelly.

Ash focused on the gun. This person's finger was on the trigger, and even if he attacked, Aura or not, he could still so easily hurt Bonnie in the process. He wet his lips with his tongue before his hand went to his belt, pulling off an old pokeball with a lightning bolt on it. "It's just for now."

"Pikapi." Pikachu's ears dropped. He understood but he didn't like it at all.

"It's okay. Everything will be fine. You'll see."

Pikachu nodded, and Ash pressed the button, feeling something clench tightly in his chest the moment Pikachu disappeared. That was the first time since meeting that he had gone into his pokeball. Pikachu never wanted to be in there, but this was Bonnie's life on the line and no amount of their own pride or comfort was worth that.

Bright brown eyes narrowed and looked up, his fist clenching around the pokeball. "What do you want?"

"You." The man said simply enough and the one behind him shifted closer. "You be a good boy and come with us quietly, and we don't kill your pretty little friend."

They weren't bluffing, he could tell that much. He tried to get a feeling of what they wanted, but all he could sense were convoluted feelings of greed mixed with a sick pleasure. These were the type of people who would get rid of an innocent child to get what they want, and Ash wasn't willing to risk anyone's life that way. "You let her go first. You let her leave and don't go after her."

The man that wasn't holding Bonnie laughed loudly. "Do you think we're stupid, Ketchum?" So they did actually know who he was. "What would stop you from attacking us? No, you're both coming with us. We'll drop her off in a safe spot and leave her alone. Don't trust you not to do something stupid if we let her go too soon." He motioned to the ominous black vehicle that Ash hadn't noticed until that moment. Sadly, in a place like this where so many important people were making appearances, especially for the final battle of the tournament, a dark SUV didn't stand out as suspicious at all.

"What if she runs for help?" The other one asked.

"Won't matter. We'll drop her off far enough away so we'll be long gone by the time she finds someone." The first one kept his dark eyes trained on Ash.

The young man wasn't in the habit of trusting people who were holding a gun to his friend's head, but he could actually feel the honesty in his words. That was more than a little bit unsettling. They really didn't want Bonnie, just him, and they were willing to let her go.

"Deal." The person behind Ash moved quickly, grabbing his arms and slamming him into the ground. Pain rushed through him and he coughed a bit, looking up at Bonnie's terrified eyes as his hands were bound. The person holding him grunted with exertion, but Ash wasn't going to make his life any easier, letting himself be basically dead weight to drag around. Though he had been a rather short boy through his childhood and early teen years, he shot up quite a bit in the past two years, so he wasn't exactly small or easy to drag around.

He grunted as he was slammed into the car, his ribs twinging uncomfortably. He felt someone grab as the pokeballs on his belt, taking them away and throwing them into some sort of box, probably to stop them from opening. It was just as well, since they were starting to twitch and shake as his pokemon realized something was horribly wrong. The door opened beside him and he was roughly shoved inside.

"Ash!" Bonnie cried out in horror. He shifted so he could actually see her, because he would have absolutely no mercy if they tried to do something to her. He wasn't afraid for himself, he could get out of this situation on his own, but he didn't want anyone else getting hurt in the cross-fire.

"Get them both in." Ash was shoved roughly into the back of the SUV, his head hitting the door frame on the way in. It was one of those ones with three rows of seats rather than two, and he was forced into the middle row. Bonnie screamed as she was practically thrown in after him. Ash wanted to reach out for her, but with his hands bound, it was impossible. Someone shoved her into him, climbing in beside them, a gun still in hand.

"Ash," Bonnie whimpered, grabbing onto his arm. She was such a brave girl, trying desperately to keep her expression straight, but he could feel the fear rippling off of her.

"You'll be okay," he whispered, not daring to promise anything about himself. "You'll see."

"Don't make promises that you can't keep," a feminine voice whispered, and Ash gasped as a black bag was thrust over his head. From the sounds of it, the same thing happened to Bonnie. Ash struggled, trying to focus his Aura, but pain rushed through him as something slammed into his head, and everything went black.

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It wasn't uncommon for Ash to just disappear before a battle, but it was pretty uncharacteristic of him to show up at the last minute. He didn't say much about why that was, not beyond a bad experience in his first tournament. It also wasn't uncommon for Bonnie to stay with him until he was ready for his battle, but he would always drop her off with them before hurrying on his way.

Clemont looked down at his watch and muttered, "2:10." Ash's battle against Alain was supposed to start ten minutes ago, and no one had seen or heard of the black-haired trainer. If that wasn't nerve-wracking enough for the blond, Bonnie wasn't there either.

Whispers formed a dull rumble in the stadium, many people discontent with the fact that the match

had yet to start. Alain was already there, standing at the edge of the arena and looking rather concerned, a younger girl with red hair leaning over the stands and talking to him.

"Where are they?" Serena muttered quietly, voicing the question that he was wondering as she looked around the stadium, as if she was hoping that they'd appear in the stands.

Clemont shook his head and said, "Five more minutes."

"Until what?" The teenage girl turned around and stared at him with worried, bright blue eyes.

"If Ash doesn't show up in five minutes, he's disqualified." Clemont knew that rules, and to some people, fifteen minutes seemed like a very short amount of time, but he understood why it was that way. If a trainer was serious about participating in a tournament, especially the last battle, they would have been there on time, or would have at least sent word about what was happening. Once a trainer was disqualified, that was it. They were out of the tournament with no do-overs, no matter their excuse. "Ash knows the rules as much as I do. He wouldn't leave it this close."

The boy couldn't even try to hide his fear. It wasn't reaching to say that Bonnie was probably with Ash, and if something was forcing him to miss the match, it had to be bad. Sure, Clemont was worried about his friend, but the thoughts of his sister truly preoccupied his mind. Ash could take care of himself, but Bonnie was his baby sister. Clemont groaned and cleaned forward, burying his face in his hands. "What if something really bad is happening to her right now and I'm just sitting here? I'm a horrible older brother."

Serena placed a hand on his shoulder. "You're not a horrible brother Clemont. We'll wait, just in case Ash shows up at the last minute, and if not, we'll look for them, okay?"

"I promised my mom that I'd always take care of her," he said quietly. Clemont sat up straight when he saw the announcer walk onto the field. "Due to his absence, Ash Ketchum of Pallet Town, Kanto, has been disqualified. This year's Kalos League Tournament Champion is Alain!"

The crowd booed loudly, while Alain just shook his head, clearly unimpressed. The blond knew that the boos had nothing to do with the trainer, but rather the cancellation of the match. There wasn't time to think about that though. Serena stood up and looked at him, "Lets go find them."

Standing up, Clemont nodded his head and they started searching for the fastest route out of the stadium. "Be careful, Bonnie," he whispered to himself.

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Bonnie didn't want to admit it, but she was terrified. The black, canvas bag over her head only made the anxiety worse. The only comfort she had in the situation was that she had Ash with her. At the same time though, the young girl knew that they had done something to hurt and knock him out earlier. She was pressed against his side for comfort, so she could still feel him breathing, but he was also slumped a little bit. If he was awake, he would have been talking the ears off of their captors.

The blue-eyed girl wasn't quite sure how long that they had been driving, but it felt like days to her. She couldn't even see anything to know if it was still day, or if it was night.

What she did know was that the SUV was slowing down. It pulled to the side of the road, coming to a complete stop. She cringed back a bit, wondering if they were wherever these guys intended on taking them.

"What are you doing?" The woman in the car asked.

"Letting the girl go."

"What? Just get rid of her."

"She's not part of the deal and we don't need her. I'm not going to kill a little kid." One of the doors opened, and Bonnie could hear the crunching of gravel coming from outside as someone walked around the car. The door right beside her was yanked open violently, and one of the men grabbed her arm.

"Let go of me!" she yelled, her legs flailing. A scream escaped her lips as she was roughly thrown to the ground, tears welling up in her eyes from the sting of the gravel scraping her skin. She took a few deep breaths, trying to keep her pain hidden. Suddenly, her hands were freed and the bag was ripped off of her head.

Bonnie took several deep breaths of fresh air before looking up. For a brief moment, before the man closed the door to the black SUV, the young girl could see Ash slumped over in the back seat. She jumped to her feet just as the man climbed back into the vehicle, and it sped away.

"Stop!" Bonnie yelled, running a few paces after it with her arm outstretched before stopping. "Ash..." She looked around, not recognizing anything on the tree-lined highway. It only occurred to her then that those people had kept their promise to Ash to let her go, but it didn't really matter.

Panic started to well up in her, but the young girl managed to squash it. She took several deep breaths, closing her eyes briefly. She opened them again, determination writing across her features. Her hand clenched into a fist as she turned around. "This is the way I came." She would follow the highway until it led her somewhere. Her friend needed her help, so she wasn't going to let her fear get the best of her and let him down.

Walking alone was a lot different than walking with someone else. They had gone to more dangerous places, but she always had her brother, Serena and Ash there with her. In the very least, she had Dedenne.

Bonnie didn't know how long that she had been walking when she heard rustling in the bushes. Gasping, she took a couple steps back onto the empty highway, her eyes brimming with fear. Then, a small creature with orange fur jumped out of the bushes. "Dedenne!"

"Dedenne?" Bonnie breathed out, catching the pokemon's attention. The young girl laughed and rushed forward, catching the electric-type as she jumped into her arms. Bonnie nuzzled the pokemon and said, "You saw what happened and followed me all this way?"

"Dedenne dedenne," Dedenne nodded her head. The small creature jumped out of her arms and spoke rapidly, running in a circle and staring at her.

Bonnie blinked and said, "They drove in circles?" Dedenne nodded her head. "That means...are we closer than I thought?" Another nod. "We need to go find help! The bad people still have Ash! Can you show me where to go?" The pokemon ran ahead slightly before looking back.

Relief rushed through the young girl. Alone, she was afraid, but with Dedenne, she was pretty sure that she could do anything.

...

His head was pounding as Ash slowly regained consciousness. It took him a few minutes to remember why there was a sack on his head, and why he was in a moving vehicle. It took him a second after that to realize that a small figure definitely wasn't beside him anymore.

Jerking up roughly, someone in the car let out a startled yelp at his sudden movements. "Where's Bonnie?" He grunted in pain as someone nudged him roughly with the muzzle of a gun.

"Be nice," a feminine voice spoke up, sounding more amused than anything else. "We took pity on her and dropped her off, just like we agreed."

She was telling the truth, and while he was relieved, Ash couldn't help but feel wary. If they wanted something from him, surely it would have been smarter to keep someone to use against him? If these people knew the first thing about him, they should know that he wasn't at all worried about hurting himself in the process of stopping them.

With that in mind, Ash tried to think about what he could do. It would be easy to break his bonds with his Aura and attack the driver, but he really didn't want to do that.

Without warning, the sack was suddenly ripped off of his head. The teenager took an instinctive, deep breath before glowering at the people sitting around him. The female that was speaking to him suddenly moved from the front seat, climbing back and sitting down where Bonnie had been before, sandwiching him between her and the other man beside him. Her leg brushed against his, and he quickly jerked away from her, scowling.

"Oh, you're funny," the young woman laughed as she turned on a tablet that was in her hands, pressing a few buttons on it. She scooted closer to him, and there was no where for Ash to go, so he settled on glaring at her.

"You don't like attractive women sitting next to you?" Her voice was viciously teasing, her cold eyes amused. "What if I had red hair and green eyes? Wore yellow and collected water pokemon." Ash's eyes went wide at the description and she laughed.

"That's why we didn't need the little girl." She pushed the tablet in front of him. "If she could motivate you to surrender to us without much of a fight, I wonder what you'll do for these two?"

Ash's brown eyes glanced towards the screen, and his stomach dropped, horror creeping through him. The tablet was set up to a live feed (or so it said) of a small room. In that room, bound and unconscious, was his mother and Misty.

"Why are you doing this?" The question escaped his lips before he could stop himself.

"Boss' orders." She leaned forward to look at the man on the opposite side of him. "Better cover up his pretty face again. Wouldn't want him to know where we're going."

The sack was roughly shoved onto his head again, and he felt the woman grab his arm. Ash shrugged a bit, wincing when he felt a small prick in his arm. "There, that'll do you longer without any brain damage. Wouldn't want that right now, would we?"

Ash just groaned as he began to feel light headed, his body swaying and then falling as he once again lost consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time!

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A Tale of Heroines

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Serena watched Clemont tap his fingers nervously against the wooden table they were both seated at. She wanted to reach out and stop him, partially to end the infuriating tapping, but more to try and comfort her friend.

They were sitting in a busy police station, several Officer Jennys moving quickly along with some other officers. An Amber Alert was issued, not for just Bonnie, but for Ash as well once she and Clemont reported them both missing. Serena had wanted to keep looking, wanting to believe that they just got held up getting food or something like that. She knew it was unrealistic, neither of them would have missed the match for food, but she wanted to be optimistic. Clemont insisted on going to the police though, since time was so important in kidnapping cases.

It was a bit strange to group Ash under that, since he was older than her, but at 17, he was still considered a minor in the government's eyes, even though the Pokemon League considered trainers who were 16 and older as adults. Sometimes things like that caused issues, but in this case, two people were missing and there was no time for messing around.

Serena didn't know what to say or do. She wanted to tell Clemont that everything would be okay, that Ash would take care of Bonnie, but she couldn't do that. She knew that the police had a video from the Pokemon Center, one that depicted what happened to Ash and Bonnie, and whatever it was made them all seem a little more urgent. They refused to show them, at least not until their parents got there and gave them permission.

The young woman stood up, drawing her friend's attention. She pressed her lips together as she eyed the laptop that the officers had been watching the video on earlier, teasingly sitting outside the door.

"What are you doing?" Clemont asked, his voice coming out as a pained croak.

She looked back around, pressing her finger to her lips before peaking out the door. She looked left and right, reminding herself over and over again that she wasn't stealing, she was just moving something into another room. When she was sure that no one was looking her way, Serena lunged

out, grabbing the laptop and running back into the room that they were told to wait in.

Clemont stared at her with wide eyes as she sat down beside him again, pushing the laptop towards him. "The video they were watching, from the security tape at the Pokemon Center, was on this," she explained.

The blond boy understood immediately, pressing his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he scooted closer to her, bringing up a search window to find the file on the computer. It was actually fairly easy to find, since it was the last thing they viewed on the video program.

Serena kind of expected blurry images, and was surprised to see how clear it actually was. A few people wandered by, including Ash and then Alain as they both went into the Pokemon Center a few minutes apart. In that period of time, a black SUV pulled up.

Clemont inhaled sharply as Bonnie skipped into view, a big smile on her face. He sat up straight when a man got out of the SUV and grabbed a hold of her. The little girl flailed, and barely a minute later, Ash came barreling around the corner. The encounter was very tense, and they were both surprised to see him willingly put Pikachu away. There was no sound, so they couldn't hear what Ash was saying, but he appeared to be arguing with the other men, motioning towards Bonnie.

Serena's eyes went wide as she put two and two together. "He's trying to get them to let her go."

"They didn't want her," Clemont added, his voice strained. "They wanted Ash and used her." That much was obvious as both were forced into the car, which sped off seconds later. He groaned and slammed the cover of the laptop down, leaning back in his chair.

"That's good for her though, right?" The teenage girl looked at him, tugging nervously at her short hair. She really wished that she still had her long locks instead to hide behind at the scathing look he gave her. Clemont's expression softened quickly and he shook his head.

"No. It means they want Ash for something, but they can get rid of her at any time." He leaned forward, elbows resting on the table as he buried his face in his hands and shook his head again. "Why is this happening?"

Serena's hand rose up, reaching out to him before she brought it close to her chest, staring uncertainly at his slumped form. She closed her eyes for a brief moment and then opened them, reaching out and putting her hand on top of his. "They're not us." Clemont looked over at her. "Ash and Bonnie are both fighters in ways we aren't. You know it and I know it. If anyone can get out of this, it's them. Maybe even easier than if we were with them."

"I hope you're right."

...

The next time Bonnie was kidnapped, she really hoped that her captors would drop her off closer to a sign of some sort so that she could know where she was going. Or give her a map at the very least. Dedenne said that they weren't that far away from the city, but it still felt like they had been walking for hours. The young girl was tired, hungry and her feet hurt badly.

Cars drove by them earlier without stopping, no doubt thinking that she was just a young trainer keeping closer to the roads. That was a while ago though, and she was really surprised that no one else had come by. It was eerie being on a highway without anyone there. At least it made sense in forests.

Dedenne's ears twitched, and the small pokemon stopped, looking around, nose twitching. Bonnie heard the sound of an engine moments later, and was prepared to jump into the woods, just in case it was the people who took Ash coming back to get her.

It was a polished, white sports car that slowly came to a stop by them. Bonnie eyed it warily, but gasped as the person inside quickly got out. The young girl recognized her immediately as Diantha, the Champion of Kalos. The woman's pale blue eyes locked onto her as she made her way over.

"Bonnie Liscio." The blonde nodded her head numbly. Diantha smiled broadly at her response and said, "Thank Arceus. Are you hurt at all, sweetie?"

"No, I... no?" She shook her head.

"Good. Everyone's been looking for you." She pulled out her cellphone and quickly dialed a number. "Yes, Jenny? It's Diantha. I found Bonnie. Yes. Yes. She was on the side of the road walking. No. No. I'll ask." The woman looked towards her. "Bonnie, do you know what happened to Ash?"

Bonnie gasped, slapping herself in the face. She then lurched forward and grabbed onto the hem of the Champion's white shirt. "They still have him. The people that took us. They didn't want me, they wanted him. You have to help him! They knocked him out so he wouldn't fight back and he was just trying to keep me safe." Tears welled up in her big, blue eyes. "They—they said they didn't need me but Ash made them promise to let me go. They were talking and said something about having other people." No one thought twice about talking in front of her. After all, she was just a little girl so why would they worry?

Diantha's brow furrowed and she repeated the information to the woman on the phone before hanging up. "Right, lets get you back to your brother and father. They're both waiting for you. In the mean time, unless it makes you uncomfortable, tell me everything you can remember. Even the small things."

Bonnie picked up Dedenne, who slumped down in her arms, not really surprised by how tired the pokemon was. Diantha helped her into the car and made sure that she was buckled up before they sped off towards the city and Bonnie recounted the story of what happened.

...

The next time Ash regained consciousness, it was with a jerk that made his back crack. His heart beat wildly, his brain was racing, his breathing ragged, and, as his eyes darted around the room, he vaguely realized that someone was throwing out a needle.

The room was dim, but that made all of the other colours and glows stand out even more. There was a man not much older than he himself was, shrouded in a murky aura that was pulsing with confusion.

"Was he supposed to wake up that quickly?" the man asked, looking over Ash's shoulder. The teenager leaned back a bit, looking around to see the same woman from in the car. He made a face at the sight of her putrid pink aura. It was disgusting to look at.

"Yes, but he's being a little more skittish. Must be a reaction to something in it. Oh well," the woman shrugged a bit. She leaned closer to Ash and said, "Do you know why you're here?"

"Cause you guys were nice enough to ask," he shot back sarcastically, unable to hold anything in as his mind raced and stumbled over all the details of the room. Ash felt like he was hyper aware of

everything, yet unable to really focus on one specific thing.

"Smart mouthed thing, aren't you?" she grumbled in reply.

The man took a few steps forward and said, "Don't be mouthy to a lady. Do you know why we would be interested in you?"

For a brief moment, he was able to focus on the bright red Rs that were on their clothes. They weren't Jessie or James though, so he didn't plan on being friendly to them. "The fuck would I know? I bet you don't even know?" What did they inject him with, because it was really potent stuff.

"Of course I know."

Brown eyes shot towards him, and a smile curved up on Ash's face. "Tauros shit. You're lying." He was still focusing on things beyond the room they were in, but he found something that was able to make him focus a little more. Two bright, cheery auras that he was very familiar with. "Hey. Hey, I want my mom and my Misty."

"Mama's boy, aren't you? They're not even here."

Ash sighed and looked at them with a raised eyebrow. "Course they are. A few floors down wherever we are."

The woman, who had been leaning on the table in the room, stood up straight. Her hands went to her hips as she leaned forward again. "How do you know that?"

"Maybe that's why they want me."

The two Team Rocket members exchanged uncomfortable looks and Ash knew that they had no idea why they had to take him, just that they did. He had no idea why Team Rocket would bother with him, not as of late, at least. He rarely even got to see Jessie and James anymore.

"Why are we bothering with this?" The woman finally asked, directing her attention to the man. "It doesn't matter why the Boss wants him. We did our job already. Now we just have to keep him secure until pick up."

"We've run after psychics, people who can throw balls of energy, who can talk to pokemon in ways we can't. I'm sick of being unprepared." The man looked at Ash again, narrowing his eyes. "You can do something. You're not that good of a trainer to end up on the list."

"List?" Ash repeated.

"Enough," the woman spoke quickly. "Just make sure he's locked up tight. If he tries something stupid, we'll bring his mother in here and slit her throat."

Just those words alone were enough to make Ash focus on the real problem at hand. He jerked violently, gritting his teeth at the restraints that dug into his wrists. "Don't touch my mother," he spat at her. The teenager should have been expecting the blow to the face that he got from the man. Whatever kind of drugs they put in him made it hard to try and do anything with his Aura, so he couldn't lash out at them.

The man leaned uncomfortably close to him. "We will do whatever you want to them. The redhead's pretty, maybe I can have some fun with her before we ship you off."

Ash jerked forward again, using his head as a weapon by slamming it into the dark-haired man's. He heard a howl of pain, feeling a bit of vindication even as he lost consciousness again.

...

Misty faded in and out of consciousness several times before she fully woke up. Her mouth was dry, her head was woozy, and she was really confused. Realizing that she was laying on an old, wooden floor, the teenager pushed herself and looked around with confusion. The little room was dim and sparse, wallpaper peeling off of the walls.

A small groan caught the teenagers attention, and she shifted, grimacing a little bit at the zip ties that dug into her wrists. A small snort escaped her lips, because their captors couldn't even get real cuffs for them. Misty frowned when she saw Delia slowly waking, her eyes fluttering open. The woman looked around with just as much confusion as she had earlier, and sat up. "What in the world?"

"I think they used something like Sleep Powder on us," Misty said, shaking her head a bit. "When we got in the taxi but I have no idea where we are."

Instead of panicking, Delia frowned. She eyed Misty for a moment warily and asked, "Are you hurt at all?"

"No. I'm fine. Are you?"

"No," if anything, the woman seemed displeased with this. "There were a lot of people looking for cabs at the station, wasn't there?"

"Yeah," Misty didn't say anything else, since Delia was clearly in the middle of an important thought.

"If this was the work of a sicko just wanting to kidnap people, I doubt we'd be left alone like this. Not the two of us together. They must have targeted us specifically, but how..." The woman shook her head. Misty understood what she was wondering, getting on the same track as she was. How would they have known when they were coming? They would have had to have been tracking their passports and itinerary. Why they would have been tracking them in the first place was the real question.

Her head snapped up, sea-green eyes going wide. "Ash. This has to do with Ash." Her mind ran over the scenario in the car, and she remembered the distinct red R that she had seen. "Team Rocket..." There were definitely a lot of reasons Team Rocket might have targeted Ash, especially when he was getting so much media attention at the moment for being in the final two of the Kalos Tournament.

"I think so too," Delia nodded her head, brow furrowing angrily. "I don't know who they are, but if they think they're going to use me to hurt my baby, they have another thing coming." She jerked her hands roughly. "Stupid things."

"Wait, don't hurt yourself," Misty advised her. She pulled her knees up to her chest, slipping her arms underneath her so that she could see her hands, rather than having them bound behind her. The young woman eyed the zip tie, biting onto the part that was looped through the locking mechanism to not only move that part directly between her wrists, but tightening it as much as she could.

Misty looked at Delia and said, "If you get your wrists in front of you and tighten them, you can break out of them." She raised her hands up above her head and then jerked her arms down and backwards in one fluid motion. Sure enough, the zip ties snapped off of her wrists. "When you do it, your arms should look almost like Torchic wings and when you bring your arms back, your shoulder blades should come together some. Don't let it just go down."

The woman blinked and then laughed a bit. "You're something else, aren't you? Come here for a second." Misty walked over and knelt down in front of Delia. The brunette nodded to her hands, "Look at the lock on zip tie, you should see a tiny plastic bar inside." Misty looked down, humming a bit and nodding her head. "Good, use your finger nail and press down on it." It took her a moment, but she managed to do as the woman instructed, staring with surprise as it came undone with ease. "You're not the only one with tricks up her sleeve," Delia winked at her and stood up, stretching out her limbs.

Misty just stared for a moment before shaking her head in amusement and standing up. She got up and walked over to the window, only seeing a dark forest. If there was anything else around them, she couldn't see it from her position.

The sound of shuffling drew her attention back in the room. She watched Delia take the pink, short sleeved cardigan that she always wore over her yellow t-shirt, off and toss it on top of something. At Misty's inquisitorial look, Delia nodded at it. "There's a camera. I doubt there's more than one, but just be ready in case someone else shows up." Kneeling down in front of the door, Delia reached back and pulled a couple pins out of her hair, letting the brown tresses fall into her face.

Misty walked closer, watching with interest as Delia twisted the two pins and began to move them around slightly in the old keyhole. It took a few minutes, but there was a click, and the woman twisted the doorknob, smiling victoriously as it came open. "How do you..."

"Dates with Ash's father weren't very conventional." Misty's face turned a bright shade of red, and a second later, Delia's did as well. "No, no, no, not like that. I meant that there was always come kind of trouble following him."

Pressing her hand to her warm cheek, the teenager shook her head a bit and said, "Well, I—uh—right. We need to get out of here and find my pokemon." She managed to get her blush under control. "We need to warn Ash before they try to do something to him."

Delia stood up, nodded her head. She peered out the door, and said, "There's no one there. Come on." They slipped out of the room into a long, dark hallway.

"This doesn't look like a Rocket base or something," Misty whispered as they walked carefully along the old floors, wary of the fact that any of the old floorboards could creak loudly beneath their feet. To her, it looked like an old, abandoned mansion that was probably haunted by dozens of ghost-type pokemon.

It wasn't lost on the redhead that Delia stayed in front of her the entire time, being the first to peak around corners to see if there was anyone down there. Misty didn't like it, but she knew how stubborn the woman could be and wasn't about to push the topic.

Delia frowned suddenly and moved back. "There's someone sitting down there. It looks like he's playing with a tablet of some sort."

Misty leaned forward, sea-green eyes narrowing as she took in the young man sitting there. He couldn't be much older than she was.

"We have to wait for him to leave," the brunette muttered. "If he's guarding something, that's probably the way we need to go, and he's armed."

The teenager looked down to see that there was a gun holstered on his belt. The smart thing to do would have been to run and hide, but she had no idea how long until it was discovered that they were gone. She looked back around the corner just in time to see the man jerk with surprise.

"The camera's covered. Damn." Misty pursed her lips and looked back at Delia for a moment. Her face twisted into an apologetic look, and then she moved.

The redhead launched herself at the young man, who was visibly startled by her sudden appearance. He reached out to grab her, but Misty was faster, getting close and slamming her fist upward into the soft tissue under his ribs. When he gasped in pain and doubled over, she beat her arm into the back of his head to force him down faster, slamming her knee into his head as he fell. Then she shoved him to the floor, ignoring her throbbing knee as she smirked down. Looking back at Delia, she said, "Problem solved."

The woman laughed and joined them, searching over the desk. "See if he has anything on him."

Misty nodded, frisking through his pockets, coat and around his collar to see if there was anything hanging around his neck. She found keys, a phone, a hunting knife, a gun and extra ammunition. She put everything on the chair and looked at what Delia found.

"Nothing special, just what he had on him," the elder Ketchum said, frowning a bit. "Honestly, this whole place looks kind of thrown-together really quickly. Run down. If I had to guess, I'd say that this is just a holding place."

"A holding place for Ash, and us to use against him," Misty clarified. "We need to find the pokemon and get out of here before they get him."

Delia grimaced as she looked at the tablet, that was conveniently still turned on. "I think we're too late on that." She turned the tablet around so Misty could see, and along with the blank screen that was obviously supposed to show the feed from the room they were in, there was one focused on a boy slumped down and bound to a chair.

"Ash," Misty muttered, her eyes going wide with horror. "They already have him."

Mrs. Ketchum took back the tablet. It was a common brand that Misty herself had shown the older woman how to use, so it took her no time to change the password so that they could open it again if it turned off. Then, she started looking through it. "Huh, well that's convenient. I guess this place is new for these guys too, they have everything listed here. Even the fact that we're still in Kalos. Route 14 in between Laverre and Lumiose. Trees and swamp area."

Misty took the tablet and looked through the information quickly, but then turned it off just in case someone tried to track it. It definitely wasn't something she wanted to lose.

"We know where we are, we know there are cities and probably smaller towns around us," Delia spoke up again. "Let's find the pokemon, Ash, and get out. Do you know how to shoot?"

Misty was startled by the question and looked down at the gun sitting ominously beside her. She touched the cold, dark metal and shook her head. "No. I'm all for self-defense but I never..."

"It's okay," Delia assured her, taking the extra ammunition and putting it in the only place she could, her pocket. She picked up the gun and started checking it over. "I know how."

"You do?" She was surprised, really, really surprised. "Why?"

The woman opened her mouth to answer, but the man on the floor groaned and started to get up. "Pull him up." Misty decided not to question her, using her surprising strength to practically rip the man off of the floor. Delia looked at the man and asked, "Where's my son, and where's their pokemon?"

"I'm not going to tell you—," he grunted in pain as Misty jerked his arm back. "Bitch!"

"Oh I know," Misty agreed with a smirk. "You should answer her though. See, I might look weak, but I can carry my boyfriend over my shoulders like a firefighter and go running for a while, and I'm pretty sure he's a bit bigger than you and eats like a Snorlax. I will break your arm. And your face."

The man was about to argue, but there was a click as Delia took the safety off the gun, pointing it at him. "Misty sweetie, move a bit to the right please. Yes right there, thank you." Not only did that end up pulling Ross' arm even more, but now Misty was out of the way, should she actually shoot. "Tell us where the pokmon are."

The grunt weighed his options before saying, "We're on the top floor now. The pokemon are being held in the first door in the basement. Ketchum's at the end of the hall there."

"Thank you," Delia said in a chipper voice before slamming the butt of the gun into his head. He slumped down, falling to the ground when Misty let go of him. "We should hide him." She peeked into the room by them, which was luckily empty. "In here."

"How do you even..." Misty didn't really know what to say to the woman that she thought she knew well enough. She decided to follow her instructions, tugging the grunt and putting him in the room.

"Right, take that bag and put everything else in it. You never know, we might need it." Delia clicked the safety onto the gun, deciding to carry it with her. It was really a startling sight, the gun contrasting harshly against her blue skirt and yellow shirt.

"Where's all this coming from?"

Delia grimaced and said, "I told you, dates with Ash's father weren't what you'd think. Come on." The brunette led the way, managing to avoid the rooms with a couple people in them rather easily. Misty knew that it was because they were in an old mansion, and that a Rocket base would probably be much harder to get out of. She was really thankful for that.

They got to the basement without incident, finding a door that the old key they found opened easily.

There were twelve pokeballs there, and Misty was quick to grab hers, decorated with little wave patterns that Dawn had given her for her seventeenth birthday.

One of the other pokeballs started flailing wildly, the oldest one on the table with a distinct, yellow lightning bolt on it. "Pikachu," she breathed out, pressing the button and watching the familiar pokemon appeared. Pikachu's cheeks were sparking, instantly ready for battle, but his ears perked up and the sparks vanished when he saw her.

"Pikachupi!" Pikachu jumped up into her arms and nuzzled her.

"I'm glad you're okay too, but we need to find Ash now. We need to do it fast before someone realizes we're gone." Pikachu frowned and nodded, jumping back onto the table. He hit the button

on one of the pokeballs, and in a blaze of light, a rather short Lucario appeared.

Though much smaller than most Lucario, this one, nicknamed Ria, wasn't something to shake a stick at. Misty knew that she was easily one of Ash's most powerful pokemon, her slight build and height stemming from her premature hatching rather than her strength. Unique by the fact that she was the only pokemon Ash had who actually had a nickname, Ria was a rather proud, but occasionally goofy specimen. Her nickname was given to her to distinguish her from another important Lucario they once knew, who's death resulted in her life.

She lived up to that sacrifice every day.

"Ria," Misty said, understanding exactly what Pikachu was doing. "We need to find Ash, now. They said he's at the end of the hall, but we want to be sure. Can you lead us to him while avoiding everyone else?"

Ria closed her red eyes briefly, putting her paw over her chest before opening her eyes and nodding. "I can sense him." Her voice was rich, but feminine, sounding in many ways like she was wise beyond her years, though Misty knew that wasn't exactly true. She was easily one of the least serious Lucario that the redhead ever met. "Follow me." Situations like this were a completely different story though.

With Ria leading, they were able to avoid any confrontations. Her Aura gave her the ability to sense all the living people and pokemon in the house, so they were able to avoid them with ease as they made their way through the rather massive basement.

They stopped outside of an open door, peering in and seeing several people around a table, playing a card game with drinks and snacks at the table. It was such a normal sight, that it was actually startling.

"They're all so young," Delia muttered mournfully, and she wasn't wrong. Every single person in that was sitting around that table, proudly wearing a bright red R on their clothes, had to be younger than her. It made their escape easier, since no one even noticed yet, but it was still unsettling.

"Why would trainers come to a place like this?"

"Team Rocket has always preyed on young, inexperienced trainers. Not everyone can find themselves or make it on their own when they leave home, especially when they're very young. Things like that are why I'm glad Pallet has such strict rules. I'd never want to see a child that I once knew here."

Misty thought about it as they followed Ria. She'd like to say that she didn't understand, but if someone else had taken her in, told her that she could be strong, that she could belong, she might have gone with them. Only in retrospect did Misty realize how desperate she was for a friend, for a place to call her own in the world. It was amazing to think that, by saving Ash's life when she fished him out of the river, he might have inadvertently saved hers as well.

They got by them without any trouble, following Ria down the hall until she stopped at a door. "Here." Ria was about to break the door, but recognizing the old lock, Delia stopped her. The house must have been old if the same key unlocked several doors, maybe even all of them. They quietly pushed it open, peering inside.

Ash was sitting in a chair, slumped forward slightly, his arms bound behind the chair being the only thing keeping him upright. His hat was missing, hair matted to blood on his forehead. Misty didn't remember moving, but she was by his side instantly, looking for a serious head wound. It

actually wasn't that serious, much to her relief. "Ash? Wake up." She patted his cheek lightly, watching as his eyes flutter a bit.

"He might have been drugged," Delia noted, her voice tense and angry. She was standing over a needle that had been carelessly tossed aside.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu jumped up onto Ash's lap. He suddenly motioned to Misty, who took a step back, and then let a very light jolt of electricity rush from his paw into his trainer. The teenager jerked away, looking around with confusion for a moment. "Misty?" He looked around. "Mom?" Then he looked down. "Pikachu? Ria? What's going on?"

"We're getting out of here," Delia said, unlocking the handcuffs on him with the same pins that she used to escape their prison cell. Ash pulled his arms around, rolling his shoulders and grimacing before rubbing his wrists that she could see bruising from atop his gloves. "That one might be broken," she said worriedly, nodding to the one that seemed much bigger under the cuff of his dirty, ripped gloves.

"No," Ash shook his head and pushed the fabric down, revealing a shiny, black band with an iridescent stone in the middle. "I didn't want them to see it. They didn't seem super interested in me anyway." He stood up, and Delia frowned at his torn, dirty clothes.

"Interested enough to kidnap you."

"Yeah, but they were talking," Ash grimaced, holding out his arm for Pikachu to climb up before stroking Ria's forehead. "They didn't know why they were told to get me, and they didn't say it but I know they thought I wasn't worth it. They talked about other people too."

"Other people?" Misty repeated, walking in front of him. He nodded his head as he stared at her. She reached up, putting her fingers on either side of his nose, and the boy's bright brown eyes went wide. He knew exactly what she was about to do and braced himself for it. He bit his lip, a muffled grunt escaping him as she put his broken nose back into place.

Ash ignored her question, staring at her through watery eyes as he reached up, taking her hands into his own. "Are you guys okay?"

"We'll be better once we get out of here," Delia spoke up. "We need to go. Now."

There was no arguing with Ash's mother when she used that tone of voice. They both knew that. Misty looked up as Ash grabbed her hand, squeezing it tightly as they followed his mother out the door, Ria walking in front of her.

Ash just knew that whatever situation they were really in wasn't good. He couldn't even think straight due to a massive headache and just wanted to get out of there. He wouldn't admit it, but a small part of him just wanted to curl up in Misty's arms and go to sleep.

Okay maybe a big part of him wanted to do that.

"Are you guys sure you're okay?" he asked them, brow furrowing with worry as he followed them to the door.

"We're fine. They just used some sort of Sleep Powder to knock us out when we were coming to watch your match, and we woke up here in a cell. Your mom broke us out, I kicked ass, and here we are, rescuing your damsel-ass." Misty smiled at him teasingly, and Ash just shook his head. "Oh, right." She took the pokeballs that she hooked on her belt and put them on his own. "We got these for you too."

He stared at her with pure admiration that made her feel warm inside. "You guys are seriously my favourite people, people," he stressed to Pikachu, who bristled at the statement, "in the world."

There was a sudden yell from behind them, and they looked around as a young Team Rocket grunt ran out of the room, staring at them with wide eyes.

"Run," Ria spoke clearly, and that was exactly what the three of them did. They followed after her, rushing up the stairs. Another grunt was waiting by the door, but the small Lucario easily beat the person out of the way. They got outside, and ran into the doors.

"Hey, I know where we are," Ash said suddenly, looking back over his shoulder. "That was an old, gimmicky haunted house before. There's a town not far from here. It's closer than Lumiose."

"Good, lets go," Delia started leading the way without any hesitation, Ria walking by her side.

"Mist?" Ash spoke up after a moment of hurrying through the trees. "Why does my mom have a gun?"

"It's a long story."

Chapter End Notes

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What's Lost Is Found

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Clemont sat stiffly beside his father, the only movements he dared to make were the unintentional rise and fall of his chest as he breathed in and out, and the way his pale blue eyes would dart to the door any time someone came through. Across from him and beside her mother, Serena would react the same way, her entire body twisting towards the door, her fingers fiddling with the ends of her hair.

A very small part of Clemont felt a bit annoyed with her, since it was his sister that had been kidnapped, but then he just felt shame. Serena cared for Bonnie too. It wasn't just shame about his slight anger towards the blonde girl sitting across from him. It was also the fact that, while they were assured that Bonnie was safe with Champion Diantha, of all people, Ash was still missing, and he kept overlooking that fact.

The blond would even be willing to call the older boy his best friend, and yet here he was, forgetting all about the fact that this wasn't about Bonnie at all. His sister was safe. His friend was not.

"I'm sorry," Clemont said suddenly, his quiet words shattering the heavy silence and drawing everyone's attention to him. "I should have... this is my fault. I shouldn't have let her go alone, and Ash..." He shook his head.

"It's not," Serena sounded so stern that it actually surprised him, causing him to look up at her. "If anything, it's mine. I was awake. I was going to go to the Pokemon Center with him, I should have insisted. Then I let Bonnie go too." Her hand clenched into a fist over her hand. "This wasn't you."

"No," Meyer spoke up, shaking his head. "The only ones who are at fault, are the people who took them. If either of you, or maybe both of you, had been there, they still might have just made off with all of you. We wouldn't have found out so quickly. Time matters in these scenarios." The man dropped a hand onto his son's shoulders. The boy just sighed and slowly nodded.

The door opened again, and Clemont didn't even bother looking up this time. What did make him raise his eyes up was Serena's sharp gasp. His blue eyes went wide when Diantha walked through

the door of the police station, Dedenne on her shoulder and a happily sleeping Bonnie in her arms.

"Bonnie!" Meyer got there before the rest of them, startling the young girl awake as he pulled her from the Champions arms. She flailed for a moment, before calming down and hugging her father tightly. "Hey now, don't cry. You're okay."

"I know I'm okay," Bonnie sobbed onto her fathers shoulder before looking over it at Clemont and Serena. "Ash made them promise that they'd let me go if he went with them without fighting." She shook her head. "They hurt him and he was just trying to keep me safe."

"Bonnie..." Clemont trailed off, reaching up and grabbing his sister's hand. He closed his eyes briefly before looking back up at her with sheer determination across his face. "We'll find him."

"That we will," Diantha agreed, speaking up for the first time.

"Thank you so much," Meyer said to the woman, holding his young daughter in one arm while reaching up and wiping the unshed tears in his eyes. "If there's anything at all I can do to help you, just let me know."

The Champion nodded her head with a smile. She walked by them, heading towards Officer Jenny.

"We should get something to eat," Grace spoke up from where she stood beside her daughter. "Bonnie, you're probably famished."

"But what about Ash?" Serena asked her mother, distress crossing her features. Clemont nodded his head in agreement with her question.

"There's nothing we can do right now," the woman told them, regret tinting her voice. "There's a place just down the road. We'll go there and then come back."

"I agree," Meyer agreed with a nod of his head, setting Bonnie down. The girl immediately ran to her brother, hugging him tightly.

"Just a moment," Diantha came back to them quickly, her brow wrinkled with thought. "I have one question for the children before you go, if that's alright."

Clemont wanted to argue that he wasn't a child, neither was Serena, but he kept that to himself. It would be far too rude to say to anyone, especially a Champion. "What can we help you with?" That seemed more like a suitable response.

"I think I know, but does the names Delia Ketchum mean anything to you?"

Clemont and Bonnie both blinked with surprise, and the elder of the two said, "That's Ash's mother. Why?"

"Hmm, I thought that might be the case," she nodded her head. "And the name Misty Waterflower?"

"Waterflower? That sounds familiar," Grace muttered, tilting her head with slight confusion.

"She's the Cerulean City Gym Leader in Kanto. The other three Waterflower sisters are rather famous as well," Diantha clarified.

Serena crossed her arms in front of her, eyes looking towards the wall. "She's Ash's girlfriend." Grace looked at her daughter with surprise.

"Thank you, that's all for now. I'll be sure to find you if there's anything else," Diantha smiled at them all warmly, walking back into the other room. "Please don't go too far though."

"I wonder what that was about?" Meyer muttered before shaking his head. Putting one hand on Clemont's shoulder, the other on the top of Bonnie's head, he said, "Let's go get something to eat." He was quick to guide both of them out of the door.

"Serena?" Grace put her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "You never mentioned Misty before." The girl just shrugged, walking ahead of her mother, after her two friends. The woman sighed, shook her head and followed.

Back in the other room, Diantha's clear blue eyes followed the group as they left. She leaned back against the desk she was standing by, sighing and rubbing her forehead. "This is a mess."

"Ma'am?" Officer Jenny stared up at the Champion with confusion.

"Oh, not you or your officers," she assured the other woman. "It was a good idea to look for Ash's ID being used anywhere. It led us to Delia and Misty and the fact that they never reached their hotel too." She crossed her arms in front of her and shook her head. "I'm not looking forward to this call."

"Call?"

"Three Kanto natives being kidnapped in Kalos by a crime syndicate based out of Kanto and Johto?" A bitter smile appeared on the woman's face. "Politics, Jenny. The politics are going to be a mess." Diantha pushed herself off of the desk and walked towards the door. "Excuse me, I have to make that call." She pulled out her secure cellphone as she walked back to her car. Sitting in the driver's seat, she scrolled through the contacts until one was highlighted. She stared at the name for several moments before putting on a headset so she could drive and talk at the same time. It wasn't the best place to make this call, but time was of the essence and Diantha knew that she needed to get this over with, even if it meant inviting the last person she wanted to into this investigation.

Hitting the number, the woman backed out of her spot and started heading towards the Kalos League. She needed to inform her Elite 4 of what was happening. Finally, someone answered. "Hello. Yes, I'm sorry about calling when it's so early there. Could you put me through to Champion Lance Grayson? Tell him it's Champion Diantha Carnet from Kalos, and that we need to talk immediately."

...

Pikachu's ears twitched a bit. He was on the lookout for anything that could possibly be approaching them, though there was little need for it since Ria was walking with them rather than in her pokeball, shoulders tense as she scanned everything with her Aura.

Ash reached up, running his fingers through Pikachu's short fur. He was exhausted in every sense of the word. Physically, his muscles were screaming at him to just stop moving, and he was pretty sure that there was still some of whatever kind of drugs they had given him left in his system, since he felt physically sick and groggy. That could have had to do with the lack of food over the past day. Luckily, Misty had her water pokemon to help out with the water they needed. Ash's mind was still racing a mile a minute, wondering why Team Rocket wanted him in the first place, going to such an extreme to kidnap him just before the finals. Wouldn't it have made more sense to do it before or after? Then there were the thoughts of Bonnie that plagued his mind. He hoped and prayed to Arceus that the little girl was okay. There was nothing he could do for her at the moment, especially not since the cellphone that his mother and Misty lifted off of one of the Rocket Grunts

was dead. Adding onto that guilt, there was the fact that his mother and girlfriend were kidnapped because of him. Anything could have happened to them.

The sky was growing dark, the shade of the trees making it even dimmer. They all agreed not to trudge near the dirt roads and trails, not after hearing several vehicles zoom by earlier. Delia looked up at and said, "We should rest."

Relief flooded through Ash. He didn't want to be the one to ask to stop, even though a small part of him could acknowledge that, out of all of them, he was the one that probably needed to slow down a bit. Ash never wanted to be a burden though, especially not to these two people. Still, Delia wasn't just saying they needed to stop for him. She looked tired too.

"That'd be nice," Misty agreed. Ash stared at her, just knowing that she didn't ask to stop for the same reason she did. She was wonderfully stubborn like that. The teenage girl looked so tired, her hair a tangled mess that had long since fallen out of its side ponytail, small scrapes and bruises adorning her skin with tiny tears in her clothes. To some people, she might have looked like a mess, but she was there and, along with his mother, had saved him. He wasn't too proud to see the situation as anything but what it was. Whatever Team Rocket planned to do to him, he owed his mother and girlfriend.

"This spot looks good," Delia muttered, and was about to sit down, but Ash held out his hand.

"We should go a little bit higher," he pointed at the hill. "This place gets a lot of rain and the water builds up a lot in spots like this." Pikachu and Ria nodded their heads in agreement.

"Lead the way," his mother motioned towards the hill.

Ash hiked up in front of the two women, trying to keep his exhaustion to himself. Once he got up to a spot that would provide a bit of shelter for them though, he just collapsed back onto the ground, staring up at the twilight sky.

Misty walked over to where he was, leaning down with a worried expression on her face. She knelt down beside him, and Ash sat up, wincing as she touched the bruises on the side of his head. "I don't have anything to wash this off with."

"Don't worry about it," Ash chuckled a bit at her. "You look tired, you should just get some sleep."

"Pi pikachu pika pika," Pikachu pointed at Ria and himself. The Lucario nodded her head in agreement with the electric-type.

"They said they'd keep watch," the boy clarified for the other two.

"Oh thank you," Delia patted both Ria and Pikachu before sitting down, her back against a tree and her legs stretched out in front of her. "I can't remember the last time I exercised so much."

"Probably the last time you were out on a secret spy mission," Ash deadpanned. His mother just smiled at him, not denying his claims. He blinked with surprise, looking up as Misty tugged at his torn, short-sleeved jacket. "Uh, what are you doing?"

"It's ruined anyway, take it off so I can use it." She never gave him the chance to even move to take it off, tugging at it herself. Ash watched with interest as the redhead tapped one of her pokeballs, and Marill appeared. The water-type waved at Pikachu before turning to her trainer. "Can you soak this for me, sweetie?"

"Mar marill!" She sprayed a gentle stream of water onto the balled up shirt. Once her trainer

nodded her head, Marill bounced over to where Pikachu was sitting, striking up a conversation with him.

"Stay still." Misty pressed the wet fabric to his face, causing him to wince again. Ash wanted to argue with her, to tell her it was fine and that she should get some sleep, but a fierce glare shut him up before the words could even form. He tried to stay as still as possible, and in return, Misty tried to be as gentle as she could while she wiped the blood from his face.

When she was done, he looked down at the shirt and instantly understood why she was so insistent on washing his face. He must have looked a lot worse than he originally thought, judging from the dirt and blood on the ruined, blue fabric. Ash knew that even tiny head injuries could seem worse by bleeding a lot, but hadn't really thought about that.

"I'm surprised your eyes aren't swelling up," the redhead commented. "You're lucky. There's some bruising though."

He reached up, grabbing her hands in his own. Ash smiled at her and shook his head. "I'll take the bruises. Could have been a lot worse if it wasn't for you guys."

The tiniest of smiles appeared across her face. "That's true. Your mom and I are pretty awesome."

The boy laughed a little louder than he meant to, getting shushed by the three pokemon that were out of their poekballs. His brown eyes stared into her tired green ones for a moment before he tugged her forward, maybe a little more roughly than he meant to, as he laid on the ground. This time, Misty didn't put up a fight, resting her head on his arm that looped around her shoulder, with one of her arms across his stomach, the other tucked underneath her.

They laid like that for a moment. The ground wasn't exactly comfortable, but they were both exhausted and it was much better than being stuck in a creepy old mansion. "I'm sorry," Ash muttered quietly. Talking loudly at the moment felt like it would have been wrong. "Every time you come to visit me somewhere, something bad happens."

"Maybe because something out there knows that I'll always help you when bad things happen," Misty replied just as quietly. "It would have been nice to surprise you in a good way though. Sit at the match and cheer. Meet your friends. Maybe go see Lumiose City after."

"You'd like the aquarium in Ambertte Town," he added, turning a little more and burying his face into her bright orange hair.

"Mmhm," she muttered, her eyes fluttering. "Maybe someday."

Ash couldn't fight the drowsiness that settled over him, his own eyes closing. If she was right there with him, he'd probably be able to get a little bit of sleep. That was really all he wanted at that exact moment.

...

It was a fairly quiet night, even by small town standards. Officer Jenny was taking the time finishing her paperwork, occasionally glancing at the television that they had in the small police station. She tended to keep it on the news channels, just in case something was happening somewhere else that she could potentially help with. Not that it ever happened. Right now, news bulletins were all about being on the look out for that boy that was taken from the tournament. Luckily, the young girl had been found, but as an investigator, that made her even more worried about the boy.

She sighed, staring at her paper work. Jenny became a police officer because it was expected of her, but she always felt a little left out compared to her other siblings and cousins.

The door opened, and she didn't look up right away, expecting maybe the nice old man from down the road that often stopped by to chat later at night. What she did not expect to see was the exact same boy that she had just been thinking about, along with another girl about his age and a woman that had the same eyes at him.

"Hi," he said tiredly. "I'm..." Ash trailed off, staring up at the television with a blank expression, "...on the TV?" He looked towards his mother and Misty with confusion. Then, he turned around and looked at Office Jenny. "So uh, hi, I'm Ash. This is my mom Delia and my girlfriend, Misty. We just escaped from Team Rocket."

The woman stared at him blankly, dropping her pen. Her night just got a lot more interesting.

...

Serena gasped, jerking out of her sleep. Her heart raced wildly and tears welled up in her bright blue eyes. The blonde shifted, looking around the room. Though it was the one that she and Bonnie had stayed in for the duration of the tournament, it still felt eerie and unfamiliar. The little girl had spent the night in the other room, occupying the bed that Ash left vacant while her father slept on the floor between her and Clemont. The other bed in Serena's room had been taken by her mother.

The woman in question wasn't there though. The bed had been made neatly, the bag that she brought with her packed up. Serena wiped the tears away, getting out of the bed and walking towards the door. She just wanted to do something to get her mind off of her awful nightmare.

Quietly, she walked out, peaking into the other room to see that Bonnie and Clemont were both still sleeping. Continuing on her way, the teenager could hear her mother talking to Meyer quietly. She peered around the corner, eyeing the way both of the adults had frowns on their faces.

"Maybe we shouldn't tell them," Grace sighed, rubbing her arm. "Not until later at least."

"They wouldn't be happy with that at all," the man pointed out, scratching his beard. "They'll find out. There's no way they wouldn't."

"Does it make me a bad person to just want him to go away?" Serena watched her mother look to the floor, shame written across her features. "They're all friends, and I'm so happy that Serena loves traveling and performing, but trouble seems to follow him everywhere. Not just the type of trouble that other trainers get into. They told me about legendary pokemon. Now this?"

"Maybe a little." Clearly Serena's mother wasn't expecting that answer. "They'll be worried sick if we don't tell them. In fact, they'll probably try to find some way to try and help find Ash when there's no point anymore." Serena inhaled sharply at that, fear building up inside of her. "What harm can it do them to see that their friend is okay?"

That sentence made the teenager's internal panic instantly fade away. Instead, her eyes went wide, and she shot around, running back down the hall without a care of how much sound she was making. She flew through the door of the other room, managing to trip over the green bag laying on the floor. With a yelp, Serena went flying across the room, landing on Clemont's bed, her elbow slamming into his gut. The boy cried in pain, shooting up and accidentally smacking his head against hers.

"Ow! Oh Mew, are you okay?" Clemont groaned, one hand over his stomach and one on his head.

He stared at her, blue eyes unfocused.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," she rubbed her aching head and got up, grabbing his glasses and handing them to him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

"What was that about?" That question came from Bonnie, who awoke from the ruckus and looked more than just a little amused.

"Right!" A smile spread across Serena's lips. "I heard our parents talking. Ash is okay!"

"What?" they both exclaimed at the same time.

"Yeah!" She tugged at the bow in her hair. "I don't know much else but they were talking and..." Her smile instantly fell. "My mom didn't want to tell us." A bit of anger settled inside of her. Maybe the woman only meant to protect them, but that was a pretty horrible way to do it.

Jumping up, Serena rubbed her head again and said, "I'm going to get changed!" She practically bounced out of the room and back to her own. She ran through her normal morning routine, breezing through the shower and fixing up her hair before pulling on her clothes. Bonnie and Clemont got ready just as quickly as she did, and soon all three of them were standing together, waiting for the adults to notice them.

Meyer spotted them first. He blinked and then sighed, "You heard us earlier."

"Ash is okay?" Bonnie asked, her big blue eyes going wide with hope.

Meyer and Grace exchanged looks before the man turned back to his daughter. "Diantha called this morning. She told us that he, along with his mother and Misty, showed up in a small town outside of Lumiose. They were moved to the city to go to the hospital. She's leaving to go talk to them at noon, since there were a few things to wrap up here, and asked if we'd like to go with her."

"Yes!" Serena's abrupt, excited voice startled them all. Her face turned a bright shade of red, and she cleared her throat. "I mean, we should go see him, right? He'd at least want to know that Bonnie's okay, right?"

Meyer chuckled and Grace actually looked slightly annoyed. The woman sighed and said, "Alright. Well, pack your things quickly and we'll try to catch up to Diantha."

Serena smiled brightly as she looked to her other friends. Bonnie grinned back, but Clemont's lips pressed together, brow furrowing with worry. That response surprised her a little bit. "What?"

"Nothing." He shook his head. "Don't worry about it, let's get our stuff."

...

The sleep in the forest hadn't been nearly long enough, but they needed to get to safety as soon as they possibly could. They needed to tell someone what had happened before all of the evidence vanished. All of them had been expecting questions, but none of them expected to be shipped off to Lumiose City so quickly.

Misty had wanted to go back, but not like this. They were all brought to the hospital in order to get their injuries checked over, and while she and Delia were fine, the doctors still insisted on giving them that nasty, human version of a potion. When ingested to deal with internal injuries, it had some nasty side effects and it was recommended that only medical personnel do so, but sometimes when danger came around, they had no choice. She pitied Ash, who was given a much higher

dosage than either of them were due to his injuries.

She knew that they were going to be interrogated again. They told the police all about the mansion on their way over, so that they could go back quickly, but there was no way that something like this wouldn't involve interrogation over the details. Luckily for them, the doctors insisted that they rest. Unluckily, they were all put into separate rooms, and the longer Misty was away from Ash and his mother, the more irritated she became.

The redhead wanted to sink into her comfortable pillows, but sleep didn't come easily. Her mind decided that it was necessary to conjure up every worst-case scenario that it possible could in her mind. The most prevalent ones were them leaving Ash behind (not realizing that he had been taken), or finding him dead.

This left her in a bad mood, with a pounding headache the next morning. She thought it was morning at least, but a quick glance at the clock told the teenager that it was well past noon. She got up, leaving her room without a care and going to the one just down the hall from her own. Peering inside, Misty was glad to see that Ash was the only one there, though it was a bit strange to realize that Pikachu wasn't there with him. He was already awake, peeling the bandages off his arms.

"You shouldn't be doing that," Misty said as she walked into the room.

Ash glanced at her, a smile spreading across his lips. "They're fine. See." He held up his arm to show her that his once heavily bruised wrist had barely visible markings on it. "Nasty medicine works sometimes, right?"

"I'm sure having a little bit of a natural healing power helps." She sat beside him, reaching up to inspect the spot that had once been a cut on his head and was now just a scar. "Yeah, no way that's just the medicine."

Ash shrugged sheepishly. "I can't control that. It was mostly the medicine anyway. Healing takes a lot of effort and energy." That explained why he hadn't even tried to heal any of them the day before. His small smile fell as he regarded her with suspicious eyes. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

He tutted in disbelief and reached up, pressing his palm against her cheek and frowning a bit. "You have a headache, don't you?" Ash sighed and shook his head. "Wish I could heal things like that."

"Don't be silly. You've always been better at giving me headaches than healing them," she joked. Misty didn't really know why she thought it was an appropriate time and place to be sarcastic and silly, but she wanted to wipe that serious expression off of Ash's face. She wanted to see the worry gone from his eyes.

He made a disgruntled face at her. "Here I am trying to be a helpful, good boyfriend, and you're just a little jerk." The raven-haired boy dropped his hand with a dramatic sigh. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Give me all your water pokemon?" She smiled at him teasingly.

Ash shook his head, smiling warmly at her. He stared for a moment and then leaned in quickly, closing the space between them and kissing her. Misty pulled him closer, shifting so her legs were perpendicular to his, tilting her head so that their noses wouldn't collide. She really wished that that the awful medicine taste would go away, but wasn't going to complain.

A part of Misty felt like crying. She would always be supportive of Ash chasing his dreams, just like he was with her, but instead of getting used to the time and distance spent apart, it actually seemed to hurt more. She had no idea where Ash planned on going next, he didn't know either, but a part of her that she would keep to herself hoped that it'd be closer to home.

Ash pulled away first, resting his forehead against hers and just staring. Misty couldn't stop the small smile that spread across her lips, and he laughed a bit in response. She closed the distance between them again and he just pulled her closer.

They both jumped when someone cleared their throat. Misty looked around, blushing when she saw Delia's amused smile, Pikachu in her arms. Ash laughed beside her, scratching at his cheek a little bit and said, "Uh, hi mom."

"I went looking for Misty, but I suppose I should have just come here first, hmm?" She giggled a bit at them, and Misty wanted to disappear into the floor. It wasn't the first time that they had kissed in front of the woman, they never flaunted anything, but neither of them were the shy type either. There was still something embarrassing about this.

"How are you feeling?" Delia walked in, setting Pikachu on the bed. The pokemon climbed up onto Ash's shoulder, nuzzling his cheek against his trainer's. "Ash Ketchum, did you take off those bandages yourself?"

"It's fine mom," he showed her the scars. "See, all healed up. Misty's got a headache though."

Two sets of identical, brown eyes stared at her, and Misty found herself flushing more. She sighed and said, "I didn't sleep very well. I just couldn't shut my brain off." Ash rubbed her shoulder, and she smiled at him a bit.

"Hopefully we'll get through this meeting quickly, then you can get some rest," the woman said.

"Meeting?" Ash looked up at his mother curiously.

"Yes. The Kalos Champion wants to talk to us about what happened, rather than the police." Misty and Ash exchanged startled expressions. "I know, I was surprised too. She's sending over a car to get us and take us to the Lumiose Gym for security. As far as I know, your friends will be there too."

"Including Bonnie?" Ash asked, his eyes going wide with hope.

"Yes. I was told that she was there." The woman nodded her head.

"Oh thank Mew," he sighed and scratched at the corner of Pikachu's ear, the pokemon cooing with delight. "I was worried about her."

"The doctor said we could check out as soon as you two were ready."

Ash looked at Misty expectantly and she nodded her head, shifting to get off of him. She stretched out as she stood up, looking around to her boyfriend who did the same, Pikachu climbing up onto his shoulder. They followed Delia out of the room, walking outside and into the vibrant streets of Lumiose City.

"Mrs. Ketchum?" They all looked around to see a tall, rather stern man staring at them. "If you'll come this way please, we have a car to take you to Champion Diantha." He motioned to a black SUV, and just the sight of the car made Ash tense up.

"What's wrong?" Misty asked him.

"Sorry, it's just, that's exactly the same type of car that the people who took Bonnie and I had," he admitted. "This guy is being honest though."

"If you get even the smallest twinge of doubt," Delia spoke quietly, having overheard them, "let us know and we'll get out. Don't doubt yourself for an instant, okay honey?"

Ash nodded his head, and Pikachu's eyes narrowing. It might have been a bit paranoid on their part, but after everything that happened, none of them wanted to be caught off guard again.

Misty got a sinking feeling that completely took away the emotional high that she had been on. She could feel her headache starting to come back. This was always how it started, something bad that would drag them into a crazy adventure. From the way Ash grasped her hand tightly as they got into the SUV, she got the feeling that he was thinking the exact same thing.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time!

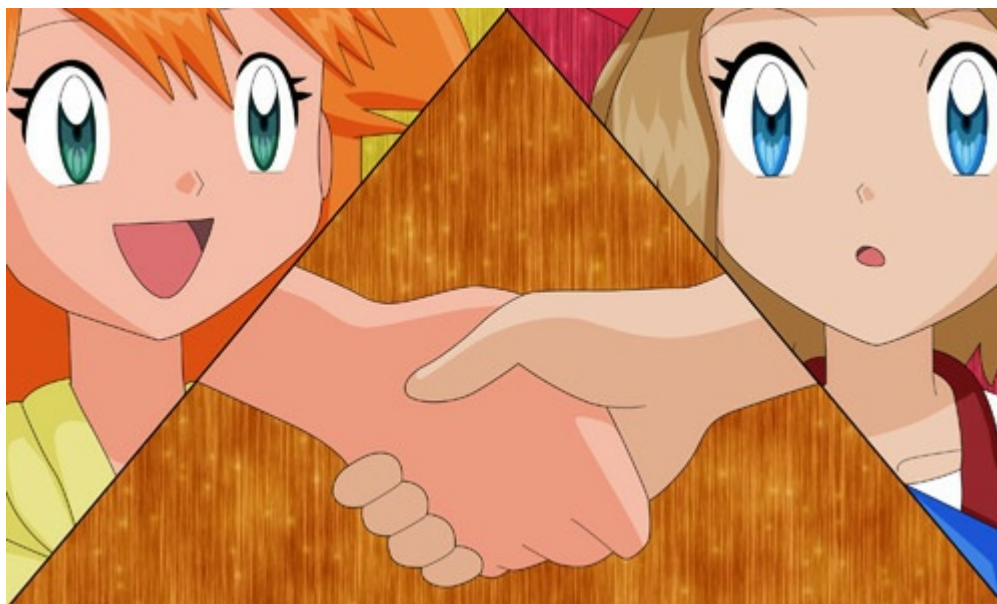
Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: CLAVUS

Peaceful Waters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



It was hard to believe that only a day had passed since Ash missed his match in the Kalos Conference. Only a day since they realized he and Bonnie were missing. Everything had really gone by in a mind-boggling blur.

Serena sat on the couch in the Liscio's living room. Clemont was helping Diantha set up something with the television and the camera, though she hadn't really paid attention to it. Her mother had taken over Meyer's kitchen, cooking up a storm, while the man himself had gone downstairs to wait. Bonnie sat beside Serena, running a brush through Delphox's smooth fur, eliciting a sort of purring noise from the pokemon. That made Serena giggle a bit, though Dedenne seemed awfully jealous from the attention.

"There," Clemont said with a nod of his head. "It should work now."

"Thank you, you've been very helpful," Diantha praised him, causing a blush to cross the teenager's cheeks. Serena smiled at his reaction and raised an eyebrow when he glanced at her. Clemont just made a face back at her. It was nice to feel a little more relaxed after the day before. The entire situation wasn't over yet, but Bonnie and Ash were okay and that was what mattered.

Meyer suddenly walked into the room, talking to a tall woman with long brown hair. Though Serena hadn't actually seen her in a very long time, she knew just by her eyes and her friendly smile that this woman had to be Ash's mother. Due to the time difference, Ash stayed up late to talk to his mother on the phone and no one else ever got the chance to meet her. Serena was the exception, having met her years before at Professor Oak's summer camp.

Serena stood, her eyes lighting up as Ash walked into the room. His hat and jacket were gone, and there were a couple of new bumps and bruises on him, but outside of that, he looked fine. The boy in question was staring at something behind him with a bemused expression that turned into an affectionate grin. It was a nice smile that made her heart flutter a bit and also made something sickly weigh heavy on her stomach in a bad way.

She was about to walk over, to growl at him for vanishing on them, or to hug him, or maybe to hit

him, she couldn't decide which one. Serena took a couple steps, but came to a sudden stop as she saw what it was he was looking at. She had only seen a picture of Misty once, and it was just a fleeting glance the time that she thought Ash had said that the redhead was his ex-girlfriend. He corrected her a little while after that, assuring her that there was no 'ex' before the title. Serena knew about the girl, but it was different seeing her. Her unique combination of fiery orange hair and blue-green eyes made the honey-blond feel a little self-conscious, even though Serena knew there was nothing wrong with her.

She had known that Ash had a girlfriend for quite a while now, and Serena wasn't about to be that person to try and break anyone up, but her feelings were still there and she couldn't change them. Despite this, she never once thought that it would hurt this much. She wanted to go up to Bonnie's room and cry, but as Ash looked around at her, she forced a smile onto her face.

Serena was still very glad that her friend was okay.

"Ash!" Bonnie launched herself off of the couch, startling both Clemont and Diantha. She hurried over, hugging the raven-haired teen around the middle. "You're okay! I was so scared! You let them take you for me and I just... if you got hurt I wouldn't forgive myself and I'm sorry! I'm just glad you're okay!"

Ash laughed and knelt down in front of the little girl, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Hey now, none of that was your fault. It was all Team Rocket. Besides, you were really helpful from what I heard!" He ruffled her hair, eliciting a laugh from the girl. "I should be thanking you!"

Bonnie hadn't really done anything, and maybe she knew that, but she still accepted the praise with a big smile. Then her attention turned to the redhead that was cradling Pikachu in her arms. Bonnie took a few steps towards her and said, "You're Misty, right?" Without waiting for an answer she looked at Ash. "You're right, she is really pretty."

The redhead laughed and bent down a bit, letting Pikachu jump out of her arms and into Bonnie's. "Thank you. You must be Bonnie. I heard about how brave you were with Team Rocket!"

Bonnie nodded her head as she cuddled Pikachu. Clemont made his way over to them and stood in front of Ash. "Thank you for doing what you could for Bonnie. I really... I just..."

"Hey," Ash stood up and clapped him on the shoulder, "you don't have to say thank you. I'd do it again in a heart beat for any one of you. Oh. Yeah." He looked at the redhead with a sheepish expression. "Misty, this is Clemont. Clemont, Misty. And..." He looked back around towards Serena and smiled brightly at her. "Why are you all the way over there?"

"Oh, just letting Bonnie have her moment," she lied, forcing a smile onto her face as she walked over. "I'm glad you're okay." Serena looked around at the other teenage girl, tugging at her blonde tresses and suddenly wishing that she still had her long hair.

"You're Serena, right?" Misty smiled at her. "Ash told me all about you. All of you. I'm Misty, and it's nice to meet you." She held out her hand and Serena shook it almost timidly. She was actually a bit surprised by how forward and confident the redhead seemed, not the least bit shy or insecure to the eye.

"It's nice to meet you," Serena tried to sound nice and polite, because it wasn't that she disliked this girl at all. It was just a little bit strange.

"I'd hate to interrupt," Diantha spoke up, drawing everyone's attention back to her. "But there are some things that I'd like to ask you about what happened. If you don't mind?"

Serena's mother came out of the kitchen, and they all moved to sit down on the couches that had been rearranged around the television. Serena looked up with surprise as Ash sat beside her, Misty on the opposite side of him. Her mother hummed a bit, staring at them with narrowed eyes until she realized that Serena was staring at her.

Diantha muttered something to herself while playing with the laptop in front of her before the screen on the television flickered to life, a program loading on it. She turned the camera around onto them and explained, "I have a colleague that wants to be a part of this conversation, though he can't be here at the moment." She clicked a button and a man with spiked, dark pink hair appeared.

"Lance?" Ash blurted out before Diantha could actually introduce them.

"Who?" Bonnie asked.

"The Kanto-Johto Champion," the teenager clarified.

The man on the screen chuckled and said, "Ash Ketchum, it's been a while since I last spoke to you. I'm sorry that it had to be under these circumstances."

"I don't understand," Meyer spoke up. "Shouldn't the police be handling this?"

"Things are a lot more complicated than that, Mr. Liscio," Diantha spoke formally, sitting down so that she too could see the television and be in sight of the camera that was sending a live feed of them to Lance. "Three Kanto natives were kidnapped by a crime syndicate based out of Kanto and Johto, in Kalos. That's very unsettling."

"I agree," Lance said. "Now, I want you all to tell us, one by one, about your day. Tell us every little thing that you can remember. One at a time."

"Mrs. Ketchum, you can start first, since your ordeal began before the others. Start from when you landed in Kalos and don't hold anything back," the female Champion instructed.

Sitting on the opposite side of Misty, Delia nodded her head and began recounting everything that happened to them. Serena listened with rapt interest, falling more and more into the story as the woman got to the parts about their escape. That surprised her a bit, because she honestly expected to hear that Ash had been the one to break them out.

She glanced up at him, blinking with surprise when she saw that he was basically ignoring his mother, and then his girlfriend as she recounted her story, adding in her phone call to her sister and Ash. Serena followed Ash's gaze, and realized that he was watching the two Champions very closely.

"Hmm," Diantha nodded her head as they finished and then looked at the blonde teenager. "Miss. Pachall, if you could share what you remember about that day?"

Serena jumped a little bit, not expecting to be addressed so soon. Her cheeks heated up when everyone's eyes turned to her. "Oh, well, um..." She stumbled through the first part of her story about seeing Ash and Bonnie leave in the morning, and not thinking anything about it until he didn't show up for his match. When she mentioned that, Ash's entire body tensed and then slumped down, but she just kept talking. Clemont corroborated her story, adding in smaller details that he picked up on from his point of view.

"Miss Liscio already told me what she can remember," Diantha said once they were done. She smiled at the young girl. "I won't make you go through it again, sweetie. Mr. Ketchum, if you could tell us what you remember, and don't leave anything out."

Ash was silent for a moment, his eyes narrowed. "They wanted me for a reason. Not because I was in the finals. They didn't actually know why though. The most I remember from the car is them showing me a video of my mother and Misty so I'd cooperate. That was after they let Bonnie go. I don't see why they just knocked me out again. Woke me up with some kind of drug at that mansion. They were asking me why they took me. They didn't know." He looked down at the floor, biting his lip before his eyes snapped up to meet Diantha's and then Lance's. "I wasn't the only one they took."

"There were more people?" The Kalos Champion sounded honestly alarmed about that.

"No, not there, but they kept asking why I was on some list. There were others. Psychics and just... other people." Ash shook his head. "Why would Team Rocket be kidnapping people in Kalos?"

"That certainly is the question, isn't it?" Diantha agreed before glancing at the television.

Lance looked back and nodded his head. "Keep going Ash. Try to remember as much as you can. No details are too small."

The end of Ash's story matched up with his mother and Misty's fairly well. Once they were done talking, the two Champions sat in silence.

"I know we're using your home, Mr. Liscio, but would it be alright for Lance and I to have a few moments?" Diantha asked politely and putting on her best, charming smile.

"Oh, of course. We need to keep working on dinner anyway. We have a bunch of growing kids here to feed!" Meyer exclaimed as he stood up. "Delia, would you like to help?"

"Absolutely," she turned to everyone else and smiled warmly. "I'm sure you can all find something to occupy yourselves with and not bother the Champions?"

"Sure," Clemont said as he stood up. Looking around at everyone else, he added, "Lets go down to the gym."

"Sounds like a plan," Ash quickly agreed, and everyone else stood up to follow the blond boy out of the room.

"Mr. Ketchum," Diantha spoke up, causing the boy to pause. "I'm so sorry about the tournament. The rules are absolute though. If there was a way to hold a rematch, I'm sure everyone would be on board in a heart beat." There was a sincerity to her voice that left little question as to whether or not she was being truthful.

"Thanks," he replied, not even bothering to hide the strain in his voice. As they filed out of the room, there was a heavy tension in the air that no one dared to break.

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"Argh!" Ash threw himself onto the bleachers in the gym, not caring if he startled anyone else by his sudden outburst after their silent procession through the halls. Pikachu jumped up beside him, patting his head while Dedenne smelled his hand curiously. "This sucks."

Clemont and Serena exchanged confused looks while Misty sighed and rolled her sea-green eyes. She set the bag that she had been carrying down by his feet and nudged him with her knee. "Don't be a drama queen, there's nothing you can do about it."

"I trained so hard for that stupid battle and just..." He huffed angrily and looked over his shoulder.

"I could have won this time, Mist. I know I could have. I didn't even think about that until Diantha mentioned it earlier."

"So what now?" Bonnie asked, climbing up so that she was sitting on the bench above his, staring down at him.

"Well, we probably can't do much until they close this investigation," Clemont said thoughtfully. "I imagine they've gone to the mansion already and are probably just looking to close the case."

"I don't think so," Ash sat up and shook his head. "I think they wanted to hear all our stories because they wanted something."

"They're fishing," Misty clarified. "Did you see Lance's face when Ash said that there were more people? Diantha clearly didn't know, but he wasn't shocked at all."

"You think he knew," the blond teenager said thoughtfully. "If people were going missing, wouldn't they tell us?" He shook his head. "It's all conjecture anyway, we don't actually know what's going on."

Ash shrugged and looked around as Serena sat down and accidentally knocked over Misty's pack. She squeaked, face heating up with embarrassment as she dove to the floor. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!"

"It's alright!" Misty laughed, moving over to help pick everything up. "To be honest this isn't even my... bag..." She trailed off as she picked up a tablet that had landed on the floor. "Oh Mew, I forgot to give this to them!" At the questioning eyes looking her way, she added, "I took it from the Rocket I beat up. It helped is figure out where we were."

"I bet there's a lot of stuff on that," Clemont leaned forward to stare at it, pushing his glasses up the brim of his nose. "You should probably get that to Diantha right away."

"Or you could look at it." Everyone looked around at Serena, who put her hand to her cheek as they flared up again. "Sorry, I mean... if you really wanted to know about a list or more people, it might be on there. But I guess you need a password, right? So it wouldn't matter."

"We changed the password," Misty said thoughtfully. "So we could get into it again if we needed to."

"Give it here!" Ash pulled it out of her hands without any hesitation, and she shot him an annoyed look. He turned it on, easily guessing the password because his mother always used the same four digits (his birthdate) for everything. Once he was in, Ash started randomly tapping at different things.

"You're just going to break it," his girlfriend huffed with annoyance, grabbing it and tugging.

Ash didn't let go though, tugging it back towards him. "No I'm not, I know what I'm doing."

"You mean like with my computer?" She tugged it towards her.

"That was an accident! It could have happened to anyone!"

"Could not!"

"Could too!"

Serena, Clemont and Bonnie stared from one to the next as they kept tugging the tablet back and forth, glaring daggers at one another.

"Should we stop them?" Bonnie whispered to her brother and friend. Serena just shrugged, looking as lost as her.

"Uh..." The blond boy never got the chance to answer as Misty pulled a little too roughly. She ended up falling backwards, the tablet flying out of her hands. Clemont yelped as it crashed into his face and bounced over into Serena's arms. At the same time, Ash shot forward, grabbing the girl before she could actually trip and hurt herself.

"You okay?" Ash called out to Clemont.

"Yup, just fine," he rubbed his face.

"Hey guys?" Serena spoke up, staring at the device in her hands. "I think you found it. There's a list of names right here." Fighting and injuries completely forgotten, everyone crowded around her to stare at the screen. Ash leaned in close and her cheeks heated up, though he instantly moved a little farther away. It was a chart with names, a region location, and a tag at the end. Most were highlighted yellow with the word 'acquired' beside them. Far too many others were marked with red and the word 'exterminated'.

"There's your name," Clemont pointed towards the words 'Ash Ketchum' on the screen, almost at the bottom of the list, highlighted yellow. "Arceus... this looks like a hit list."

"Can I see that for a second?" Ash held his hand out to Serena, who passed him the tablet. He scrolled through the absolutely massive list. The higher up he scrolled, the more red there was, and the more familiar the names became. "Oh Mew. I know a lot of these people. I've met them. I... Riley. Misty, Riley's on this list." He pointed at a name, his voice raising in pitch. "It says... exterminated."

"Pikapi," Pikachu muttered quietly as he jumped onto Ash's shoulder, his ears drooping.

"Who's Riley?" Bonnie questioned.

"A mentor and friend," Misty replied when it was obvious that the brown-eyed boy wasn't able to say anything. She put her hand on his upper arm and squeezed gently. "We should give that to Diantha. There's nothing we can do with it."

"I know," Ash replied quietly, letting his grip loosen as his eyes looked towards the floor. "I just..." He struggled to find what he wanted to say, because so many thoughts were rushing around in his mind. He suddenly blinked when he realized that part of the distress he was feeling wasn't even his. There was some from all of his friends, but there was extra coming from Misty. "Sorry. There are people you know there too."

Misty looked away, clutching the tablet to her chest. "I'm going to take this to Diantha. Maybe... maybe if she has this we can just go home." Her voice choked up a bit as she turned to walk away.

"Misty?" Ash called out to his girlfriend, who froze. He didn't have to ask anything else, she knew what he wanted.

Her shoulders slumped a bit and she said, "They were going to kill you." With that, she hurried out of the room.

Ash sighed and sat back down, putting his head in his hands. He gripped his hair almost painfully

until he felt a small hand on his knee. Looking up, his brown eyes met Bonnie's blue ones. The little girl smiled sadly and said, "You're still here, so that has to mean something, right?"

He smiled sadly and nodded his head, "Yeah, I guess it does." There had been a few names without yellow or red markings under his, and he wondered if those people had been taken already.

"What are you going to do if they say you can leave?" Serena wondered, clutching her hand over her chest.

"I... I want to go home too," the teenager admitted, leaning back to stare up at the ceiling. "I just... oh!" He jerked up, staring at them with wide eyes. "It has nothing to do with you guys! I swear!"

"We know," Clemont assured as he sat beside him. "Trust me, we get it. I just wish our adventure didn't have to end this way." The two girls nodded in agreement.

"Maybe it doesn't have to," Ash said after a moment, an idea forming in his mind. "What if you guys came to Kanto too? Even just for a couple weeks. To get away from this mess too. You can meet my other friends and pokemon too!" He wanted to sound upbeat for his friends, considering what they had just discovered. He could still feel the worry and horror inside of him, but he didn't want his friends to feel it too. It was different with Misty. He knew he could shed some tears around her.

The three Kalos natives looked at one another before Serena nodded and said, "I think I'd like that. It'd be nice to see Kanto again." She frowned. "I'm not sure if my mom will let me though. Not after this."

"Yeah," Clemont agreed with a sigh. "Dad might not want us to go either." Bonnie looked just as put-off as he did.

"Let's just ask them." Ash shrugged. "It's not going to hurt either way. Worst case scenario, they say no."

"You're right!" Bonnie jumped up and down a bit. "Let's wait for Misty to come back then we'll go ask!"

Ash smiled at the little girl's enthusiasm, glad he could get their minds off of what was happening. If that was the only good thing he could do at the moment, that was good enough for now.

...

Misty breathed in and out, trying to get her emotions in check. She held the tablet close to her chest, not wanting to see the names on it that were highlighted red, nor Ash's name in yellow. The redhead had no idea what was going on, but from this discovery alone, she just knew that Team Rocket had fully planned on killing Ash for some reason. Of course, he would just shrug that off in favour of focusing on every other name there. Somedays she just wanted to strangle him for thinking like that. She was definitely going to go grey early on in life thanks to her boyfriend.

She ducked through the open, heavy doors that separated the gym area from the living area where they had left Diantha to speak to Lance. She walked silently down the hall, stopping outside of the door to the living room, intending on waiting patiently until they didn't sound as busy.

The former Gym Leader honestly never intended on eavesdropping. She was just going to hand over the tablet and apologize for forgetting about it, but the word 'Ketchum' coming from the living room made her freeze. Of course, it made sense for them to be talking about Ash, all things considered, but something told her to stay quiet.

"So you think that's why they targeted him?" Diantha sounded skeptical and annoyed, but Misty dared not look around the corner in fear of being seen. Even if the Kalos Champion wouldn't pick up on her being there, surely Lance would see her through the camera.

"I'd bet my title on it." That reply surprised Misty. Lance had been the Champion for all of her life, and even before that for a while. The only person who had ever beaten him was Master Red, and he was notoriously proud of that fact. He must have been very serious over whatever they were talking about. "That's why I want him back here as soon as possible."

"This is my investigation, Champion Grayson." Yes, the female Champion was definitely annoyed. They had probably been arguing over that for a while now. "You have no authority here."

"No, this is bigger than you can even imagine," Lance snapped back at her.

"He's still a victim of a crime in my region. As are Delia Ketchum and Misty Waterflower."

There was a bang that was slightly muffled thanks to the television's speakers. "Ash Ketchum is the only known target in Kalos. What we discovered in that mansion is just like what was found here, and there are a lot more people that we know have vanished here. Not only that, but he's the only one to escape. It's not a coincidence. Kalos is not the target here. A Kantonian citizen was. Kantonian, not Kalanese. Delia Ketchum is Kantonian. Misty Waterflower is Kantonian and one of my Gym Leaders. Who doesn't have the authority?"

Misty dared to peak around the corner, watching the two Champions, thousands of kilometers apart, glare at each other heatedly. She jerked back as Diantha suddenly laughed. "He's the one you've been watching, isn't he? Cynthia told me about him. The boy you thought should have been inducted into the G-Men when he was only 12." That startled the redhead more than anything else so far.

"Most trainers these days are talentless," Lance replied bluntly. Misty felt her hand curl into a fist. "On average, they're average or bad. For every hundred trainers that leave home, maybe three will have any potential at all. Why do you think we've had so few challenges? You, me, Alder, a few from the other regions, no one holds a candle to us. The only newer ones are Cynthia and Wallace and they were some of the exceptions along with Steven. I'd be stupid to let one of the talented ones get away. Especially since he seems to draw the other worthwhile people to him."

"Careful Lance, it almost sounds like you might be trying to groom a replacement, and we all know that's not how things work around here."

"Given everything that's happened, maybe it should be."

Misty wanted to keep listening, but something told her to get out of there or she was about to be caught. That same voice in her head also warned her that they probably didn't want anyone to hear what they had been talking about. Of course, they shouldn't have been talking about that in someone else's home then, but she was pretty sure it would be a horrible idea to point that out if she got caught.

The teenager made a big show of slamming the door at the end of the hall like she had just walked through it, marching down the corridor loudly. Diantha met her at the entrance to the living room, her normal camera-ready face tired with bags under her eyes. "Can I help you, Miss. Waterflower?"

"Sorry to interrupt," she replied sweetly, holding the tablet out. "I feel really stupid because I forgot all about this. I lifted it off a Rocket Grunt."

"What?" Despite her abrupt exclamation, the Champion was polite in taking it from her. She slid her finger across the screen, frowning when the passkeys came up.

"Use 2205. Delia changed it to that so we could get in again."

"Smart woman," she nodded her head and typed the numbers in. Immediately the list of names appeared before her eyes and she inhaled sharply. Diantha looked towards Misty, pale blue eyes staring at her searchingly. "Did you look at this?"

"The list? Yes." There was no point lying about that. "Ash's name is on there."

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, if you'll excuse me," Diantha quickly turned and walked back into the room, the tail of her white jacket trailing behind her.

Misty knew that she couldn't eavesdrop again, so she took the information that she had gathered, and ran back down the hall. She ploughed through the door and almost tripped getting into the elevator. Leaning back against the wall, the redhead took a deep breath and calmed her nerves as best as she could.

When she finally got out of the elevator and made her way back into the gym, she was almost tackled by an excited, tiny blur. "Misty! Guess what!"

"What?" She put on her happy face while talking to Bonnie.

"We're gonna see if we can go to Kanto with you guys!"

Her sea-green eyes turned towards the others. Clemont smiled at her shyly, shrugging his shoulders a little bit. Serena, on the other hand, shifted a bit and added, "If that's... uh... alright with you?"

Misty cast Serena a confused expression. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Oh... well... you know..." the blonde faltered a bit, looking anywhere but at her.

"What did you tell them about me?" Misty instantly turned her attention to Ash, putting her hands on her hips.

"That you're a controlling nutball who carries around a mallet and hits anyone in her path," he deadpanned.

"I had that thing for a couple weeks when I thought I was going to be traveling alone! I used it like, four times at most!" She took a few steps towards him and stomped her foot on the floor childishly. "It was for self defense. It's not like... like letting your Pikachu pig out from ketchup!"

"He has it every once and a while! You act like it's on everything!"

"What?" Clemont addressed them both, clearly confused. "Mallets? Ketchup?"

"You guys are crazy," Bonnie said adoringly. "You really match! See Clemont, you just need someone to take care of you like Misty takes care of Ash! Hey, do you have any sisters?" Her last question was directed at Misty.

"No," Clemont told his younger sibling sternly. "We're not doing this right now. We're supposed to be asking if we can go to Kanto. I don't even understand what's going on."

Misty looked up as Ash put a hand on her shoulder, catching him loop his finger around his ear a

couple times and nod in her direction. She elbowed his ribs and he laughed.

"Anyway," she looked around at Serena, "of course you can come. I think it sounds like a fun idea. Get away from all of this!" Her eyes lit up. "Wait until you see Pallet Beach. Almost no one goes there because Pallet Town is so small, and it's beautiful."

Serena blinked her bright blue eyes with surprise and slowly nodded her head. "Yeah. That sounds like fun. You know, I think I'll go talk to my mom right now. There's something I have to ask her anyway." She smiled politely and quickly left the room.

"She doesn't like me very much, does she?" Misty couldn't stop herself from asking the question, even if the answer was obvious to her. The other teenager had been nothing but tense and shy around her. "Was it something I did?"

"Serena likes Ash but he likes you and you like him," the young blonde told her without any hesitation.

"Bonnie!" Clemont hissed at his sister, slapped his palm over his face.

Misty looked up at Ash with surprise. He smiled weakly and shrugged. "Yeah I didn't know how to bring that one up to you."

"Did she at least know about me? I know how you go on sometimes, talking about people and their goals and accomplishments but forgetting things like 'hey I'm also dating this person'." It was actually something Misty admired about him a lot, that he never defined her, or any of his friends for that matter, with their relation to him. It was never about how they traveled to help him, it was about how they perused their own goals and their individual accomplishments. Misty didn't mind being labeled his girlfriend on top of all of that though.

"I did, I promise. Well... after a bit of a misunderstanding where she thought I said ex-girlfriend but I cleared it up. I swear!" His bright brown eyes were practically pleading with her to listen to him. If there was one thing that Ash Ketchum was bad at, it was lying to the people closest to him. Not that she'd doubt him anyway.

"I know, I just... that explains a lot actually." Misty sighed and then perked up a bit, looking towards the Liscio siblings. "Still, I think it's an awesome idea. I'm sure that we'll be able to go home, and it'd be great for you guys to come."

Clemont eyed her with confusion before chuckling and shaking his head. "Yeah. Come on Bonnie, we'll go ask dad before he eats too much and gets sleepy again."

"Yeah!" Bonnie picked up Dedenne, who had simply been napping with Pikachu, and rushed out of the room, her brother falling in step behind her.

"Pikachu?" Pikachu tilted his head, regarding Misty oddly as he hopped over. She looked from the pokemon to his trainer to see a similar expression.

"There's something you need to know," she lowered her voice a bit, green eyes darting towards the door and back.

"There's no one coming," the raven-haired teen assured her. "I'd feel them. So what's up?"

"I overheard Diantha and Lance talking and—."

"You eavesdropped on the Champions?" Even Pikachu stared at her with shock.

"I overheard. Completely different. Don't interrupt," she poked his chest lightly. "Something really weird is going on here. I think we got into the middle of something big. They were arguing over us. Over you." Misty stared up at him with worry. "Lance has been watching you for a really long time. Diantha said it was about the G-Men and making you his replacement."

"His replace-... that's not how things work." Ash narrowed his eyes.

"I know, I just... I want to get away from here, away from all of this before something else happens. Is that selfish?"

"No. It's smart." Ash didn't say anything else about it, but Misty knew. He wasn't going to admit it out loud, but he wanted to run as much as she did.

Chapter End Notes

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: CLAVUS

Going Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Serena stared out the large glass window to the plane that was being prepped for them in the early morning light. They were in a private terminal used by the Pokemon League, waiting for everything to be settled so that they could all fly out to Kanto. Her mother and Mr. Liscio were a bit reluctant to let them travel after what had happened, but Mrs. Ketchum came to the rescue, suggesting that they come as well to blow off some steam.

Surprisingly, when they pitched the idea to Diantha, since they weren't sure they could leave, she seemed rather eager for them to go. She claimed that if she had any other questions at all that she would contact them, and the league would provide free transportation for them there and back.

Serena didn't want to seem paranoid or anything, but it almost felt like they were being herded, like Diantha wanted them gone. She had jokingly pitched the idea to the others earlier, and had been a bit taken back by the uncomfortable looks Ash and Misty had exchanged. It was like they knew something no one else did.

The blonde teenager looked around at the boy that was on her mind. Ash was sitting down on a padded chair, talking to his mother, Pikachu curled up beside him, still asleep. From the way he kept moving his arms around and was grinning, it must have been about something that happened during their adventures. That, and the way Mrs. Ketchum seemed genuinely engrossed in the story made her smile.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" Startled out of her thoughts, the blue-eyed girl looked around, meeting her mother's worried gaze. She tilted her head with confusion until the woman glanced over at Ash again before looking at her.

With a sigh, Serena shrugged. "It...hurts, but—!" She held up her hands, taking a step back when her mother looked like she was going to swoop in to hug her. "But, she seems like a really nice

girl." Serena nodded towards Misty, who walked out of the washroom and sat down beside Ash, listening to the story without interrupting. "If she was a bi... jerk, I think I would be angry. She's been nothing but nice, even to me."

A smile spread across the teenager's lips. "Besides, I want to see Kanto again!" She clapped her hands together. "It's funny, I remember the camp and everything but I don't remember much else... I don't even know why we went there, but I remember I had fun and I'd like to see it again!"

Grace stared at her oddly for a moment before smiling. "Well, if you're okay, that's all that matters to me!"

Serena smiled back at her mother before looking up as a tall man walked over to them. "We're ready for you now, please follow me."

Meyer nudged Clemont, who was been sleeping beside him with Dedenne on his lap. It was far too early in the morning, but had Diantha explained that it was the only time that they could go. It didn't really make sense to any of them since it was a private plane, but they were getting a free trip so no one complained.

Clemont jerked up, rubbing his eyes and then fixing his clothes. He smiled sheepishly as he stood, stretching out and looking down at Bonnie, who was still curled up, fast asleep. Meyer just chuckled and picked his daughter up while Clemont got her bag and pokemon.

The plane wasn't a huge one, but it was a lot nicer than one with row upon row of seats. Instead, there were in groups of four, facing one another with a table between them. After putting their luggage away, Ash helping Meyer since the man didn't want to drop his daughter, the adults took one of the tables. Meyer buckled Bonnie in, even as she snuggled against his side in her sleep, Dedenne curling up beside her.

Serena found herself sitting in the window seat beside Clemont and across from Ash and Pikachu, who was sitting by Misty. She was quick to do her seat belt up, though her attention was quickly grabbed by the blond boy next to her. He was struggling with the belt, his hands shaking slightly. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Oh, uh, I just..." His cheeks turned pink. "I've never flown in a plane before."

"Oh!" Clemont didn't say anything else, but she still understood. "It's okay to be nervous! Here, let me help you!" She reached out, helping him secure the seat belt. Once she was sure that her friend was buckled in, Serena moved her hand on top of his and squeezed it tightly. "If you get freaked out, just squeeze my hand. It'll help! I had to do that with my mom the first time I went on a plane!"

"Uh, thanks," he laughed sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head with his free hand.

"No problem!" The sound of a whisper caught her attention, and Serena looked back up to see Misty speaking quietly to Ash. His face became more and more puzzled, brown eyes glancing from one blond to another in front of him before looking back to his girlfriend like she was the strangest thing he had ever seen.

"What?" Serena was both curious and wary.

"Misty's crazy, that's what."

"You're calling your girlfriend crazy?" Misty asked, an edge to her voice.

Ash looked at her with a dead serious expression. "You're right, what am I saying?" He turned to

Serena again. "She's Zubat-shit crazy. Ow!" He rubbed his arm where Misty smacked him. "Dammit woman, that hurt! Have you been working out?"

"It did not, you big baby." The redhead crossed her arms in front of her and then grinned at the two seated across from her. "I stay in shape though."

"She's not lying," Ash added. "She can carry me around." Pikachu nodded in agreement, climbing up onto the redhead's shoulder.

"You?" Serena didn't mean for the rude-sounding phrase to escape her lips, but she tried to help Ash walk before, and for such a slender boy, he was heavy. Her face turned red and Misty snorted with amusement.

Their conversation was cut off as the captain announced that they were preparing to take off. Clemont tensed up nervously, grasping Serena's hand tightly. One thing was for sure, it was bound to be an interesting flight.

...

Once the plane stabilized and they were able to walk around the cabin, Clemont found himself relaxing. Flying wasn't so bad once he got used to it. Serena helped him a lot though.

The girl in question had curled up in her reclining seat and was sleeping peacefully. A part of him wanted to follow her example, but he was too wired, too awake for that. Across from him, Ash had nodded off in his seat, but the moment they had been allowed to undo their seat-belts, he took advantage of that by laying down, his head resting on Misty's lap. Pikachu curled up by Ash's feet, fast asleep again.

Clemont eyed the redhead curiously. Despite the fact that she had stayed at his home last night, he really didn't know much about her. At the same time, he could probably list off a hundred things thanks to Ash's ramblings. There was something a bit surreal about knowing that Ash actually had a girlfriend, since he just seemed a tad stunted in that area before they found out about her.

Misty turned her sea-green eyes towards him, her boredom obvious. "You wanna play a game?"

The blond blinked. "What?"

"I'm bored," she clarified, turning around and digging through the minuscule bag that she had with her, having lost her original traveling bag when she was kidnapped. She pulled a deck of cards out and turned to face him again. "You know any card games? I'll even play go-fish!"

"Don't play rummy with her," Ash said suddenly, startling both of the gym leaders. His voice sounded so tired that neither was sure if he was actually awake or not. He didn't even move from his spot on her lap. "She cheats."

Misty rolled her eyes and shook her head as his soft snores once again sounded throughout the cabin. "He just sucks at card games. Do you want to play?"

"Sure, why not. We can start with go-fish then!"

"Alright! Hey, why don't we make this interesting? Every time one of us gets a pair, the other one has to tell a fact about themselves."

Clemont grinned. "Sounds fun!"

Misty dealt out the cards and Clemont nodded for her to start. She hummed to herself a bit and asked, "Got any threes?"

"Lucky guess," he handed the card over to her. "Alright, I'm Clemont Liscio, leader of the Lumiose Gym! Got any sevens?"

"I meant other facts I didn't know!" She snickered and passed him a card. "I'm Misty Waterflower, and I'm not the leader of the Cerulean Gym anymore. My sister Daisy just got the title back."

The game went on and on, and Clemont found himself learning more and more about the girl sitting across from him. She had three older sisters that she loved and hated at the same time, she was going to be an aunt in a few months, she wanted to be a Water Pokemon Master, she hated peppers and carrots, but nothing overpowered those two things like her hatred for bug-type pokemon. There were exceptions, but in general, she didn't want them anywhere near her.

"Wait, what about a Surskit then?" They both jumped at Serena's voice. She blushed when they looked at her, not having realized that she woke up at some point of time. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt, but I'm curious."

"I own a Surskit," Misty admitted, "it took us a while to warm up to each other though. My friend, Leaf, helped me catch it and she thought it was absolutely hilarious since it was afraid of me too. Do you want to play? We can start over!"

Clemont looked at his friend curiously. He was well aware of the girl's crush on Ash. It was terribly obvious and he caught onto it almost right away. The scientist in him was really curious just to see how this whole scenario would react, while the friend inside of him prayed that nothing would set the two girls off at one another. He was sure it would end up badly.

"Oh," Serena hesitated, but then smiled a bit and nodded her head, much to his relief. "Sure. How about—." Whatever she was going to suggest was cut off by the plane suddenly jerking. The cards went flying, and Ash instantly jerked awake, Pikachu crying out with surprise. Across the isle from them, Bonnie too snapped out of her sleep, looking around with confusion, cuddling Dedenne close to her chest.

"Buckle up, please!" The flight attendant called out to them. "It's just some turbulence, nothing to worry about, but we don't want anyone tripping or falling."

"What the hell?" Ash muttered, narrowing his eyes as he stared out the window. Pikachu climbed up onto his shoulder to try and see what he was looking at.

"What?" Serena leaned towards the window she was by. "I don't see anything."

"It's nothing," Ash looked away, not even trying to hide his confusion before he looked out the window again as if double-checking whatever it is he had seen. He looked back at them and smiled. "Nothing to worry about."

Oddly enough, that didn't reassure Clemont at all.

...

It never really occurred to Bonnie how far away Kanto was from Kalos. She knew that Ash stayed up late to talk to anyone there, but knowing and experiencing were two completely different things. The little girl had slept through the first part of the trip, but became a ball of energy for most of it, though her eyes were starting to feel heavy again.

She had never been on a plane before, but the girl took to it quickly. She loved looking out the windows, though Clemont looked a little bit sick when she got him to look.

They were back in their seats again, buckling up as the plane started to descend. She winced a bit at the pain in her ears, and Delia dug through her purse.

"Here you go, sweetie," the woman handed her a stick of gum. "It helps with your ears. Mine always hurt a lot at the end of a long trip and I can't hear very well afterwards. Don't be worried if that happens."

"Thank you," Bonnie replied politely, happily chewing the gum, though when the adults weren't looking, she snuck a tiny piece that she had broken off to Dedenne.

"Wow, that's Viridian City?" Ash's voice floated over to where she was sitting, and the young girl turned to look at the four teenagers, wishing that she was sitting with them, but there was no room. "It looks so much bigger from up here!"

"Haven't you seen it before?" Serena asked him, confusion lacing through her voice.

"No, I've always gone in and out of the Cerulean Airport," he admitted with a shrug, scratching behind Pikachu's ear.

Bonnie didn't really care about the landing, though her brother looked like he was going to be sick. Her tiredness had vanished, and she was suddenly all too eager to explore this new place, even if it was about seven at night and would be even later by the time they got to Pallet Town.

"Welcome to Viridian City!" The pilot chimed in over the intercom. "Champion Lance has arranged for a couple of cars to take you the rest of the way to Pallet Town."

"Oh, he didn't need to do that!" Delia called out, pressing her hand over her heart as she looked towards the cockpit.

"It was no problem at all, ma'am. He was happy to help."

"How thoughtful." Bonnie blinked up with surprise. She recognized that expression, the one that looked happy, but there was some form of annoyance lurking in the eyes. The girl remembered seeing it on Ash's face more than once.

Everyone unbuckled and got their bags, Bonnie tugging on her new blue one that replaced her old yellow one. A lot of her things were with her father and brother, mostly just to make room for Dedenne in the pouch. She tucked the pokemon in and then skipped over to the others. "We're in Kanto, Clemont!"

"I know," he replied with a nod, pulling his bag out of the overhead compartment and slinging it over his shoulders. "Should be fun, right?"

"Yeah!" The young blonde scurried ahead of the rest, ignoring her father's cries to slow down. She was out the open door and down the steps before anyone could stop her.

The very first thing that she noticed was how it was warmer than at home. The air felt a bit heavier and stickier, but it wasn't terrible.

"It's humid here," Serena said, slowly turning in a circle to look at everything around her. That was the word Bonnie had been looking for.

"Different climates," Clemont informed her. "It's really interesting already. Look, there are even some different trees planted there." He pointed away from them.

With a genuine smile, Ash tossed one arm over Clemont's shoulder and one over Serena's. "Wait until you guys see Pallet Town! It's a lot smaller than this but, you know, it's home!"

They all looked up as two black SUV's drove up. Bonnie took a couple steps back, staring at them wearily and wondering why everyone thought they needed to drive that type of car.

"Come on, Bonnie," Meyer said to his daughter, reaching out to take her hand, but the girl scowled up at him.

"I want to stay with the others, you guys are a bit boring sometimes," she looked down at her pokemon. "Right Dedenne?"

"Denne denne!"

"There's enough room for all five children in one vehicle," a tall man dressed in a black suit informed them. "Two seats in the middle and three in the back."

"Well, we're all going directly to my house in Pallet Town, no stopping, just straight there, right?" Delia asked with a pleasant smile on her face, her brown eyes glanced over towards her son, rather than the man she was talking to.

"Of course," the man nodded his head. "I understand why you're wary, but we are going to take you straight home."

Bonnie blinked with surprise as Ash subtly nodded. Immediately, Delia's smile became more genuine and she said, "They'll be fine then. Let the kids travel together. They could probably use some time away from us."

Misty suddenly leaned up and whispered something to Ash. His face scrunched up and he stared at her oddly for a brief moment before smiling and shaking his head. With a grin on his face, he once again tossed an arm around Clemont and said, "Come on! You too Bonnie! Lets go!"

Bonnie laughed and Clemont made a strange sound as their overly excited friend yanked him forward.

"Guess that means you'll be sitting with me," Misty chimed in, glancing over at Serena.

"Oh!" The girl's bright blue eyes went wide as she looked towards where Ash climbed into the back of one of the SUVs, Bonnie in the middle and Clemont in last. "Don't you want to sit with Ash?"

"No." Misty shrugged and walked over, climbing in and happily sitting down on one of the two seats in the middle, buckling herself in.

Serena hovered by the door with a confused expression on her face. "I just thought...I mean, you guys are dating."

"So?" That came from Ash, who shrugged. "Just get in so we can go!"

The teenager quickly scrambled into the SUV, closing the door behind her before strapping her belt on. They started to pull away, and she played with her pink skirt awkwardly for a few moments.

"Wow, look at that Pokemon Center!" Bonnie suddenly claimed, causing everyone else to jump and look in the other direction. "It looks so pretty! It's so big!"

"It must be new," Clemont told her sister. "Probably build in the last few years."

Misty snorted and Pikachu sunk down and Ash's lap, his ears lowering. Dedenne just stared at the other electric-type with confusion.

"You could say that," Ash chuckled weakly, scratching his cheek. "We... uh... kind of... blew it up."

"What?" All three of the Kalos natives exclaimed together.

"His first day as a trainer," Misty drew everyone's attention to her, unable to hide the grin on her face. "Of course, that was after he annoyed a flock of Spearow, Pikachu got really hurt, they both almost drowned, I fished them out of the river to save them, he stole my bike, and wrecked it."

"You..." Serena looked towards Ash. "What? How does that even happen?"

Ash shot Misty an annoyed look. "Okay, the Pokemon Center was Team Rocket's fault. They attacked, we were just trying to stop them!"

"By blowing it up." The redhead sighed dramatically and leaned back against the door of the car, glancing over the back of her seat towards her boyfriend. "Of course, it was a plan hatched by the kid who tried to catch a flying-type with a bug-type so there wasn't much hope for you."

"Says the girl who grew up in a water gym but still threw out a Goldeen with no water around."

"You guys have known each other for a long time," Clemont interrupted, quickly defusing the genuine annoyance that was growing out of the joking.

"Yeah, we started traveling together that day," Misty answered him.

"You mean you started stalking me," Ash pointed out.

"You owe me a bike!"

"Wait, he never paid you back?" Serena blurted out.

"No." Misty shook her head. "Nurse Joy fixed it...somehow. This bum here," she pointed behind her, "never got the money back."

Ash's annoyed face quickly melted in a sheepish one. "Uh... that's... not exactly true." He rubbed the back of his head. "I did save the money. Well, half of it at least and my mom gave me the other half. By the time we reached Saffron City."

Misty's mouth fell open. "What? And you never gave it to me?" Ash shrugged. "Why?" His face turned a rather interesting shade of pink.

"Oh!" Bonnie laughed, startling Dedenne as she poked Ash's arm. "You didn't want her to leave, right? Right?" She giggled and then looked at her brother, her smile turning into a pout. "See you need to do things like this so we can find someone to keep you!"

"Bonnie!" Clemont hissed at her.

Misty's lips turned up into a smile. "Is that true?"

Ash tugged at the beak of his cap. "Well, you know..." He shrugged.

She laughed and said, "Well, that's sweet. You still owe me though."

"Huh?" Ash looked honestly startled. "Well... you got me now so that's better than money, right?"

"...You still owe me the money."

"Misty!"

She snickered and turned back around. With a glance at Serena, the older girl whispered, "I don't really need the money but we'll let him think that for a while."

Serena shook her head. "You're horrible." Her eyes went wide and her cheeks turned red. "Uh, I mean..."

"No, it's okay," the redhead laughed. "I really am. It's great." She shifted a bit, getting a little more comfortable as Ash, Clemont and Bonnie started talking behind them. "I just remembered something I wanted to ask you! Ash told me that you participate in Pokemon Performances but I'm not entirely sure what that means. The only thing he could describe was that you perform with pokemon and that you did really well."

"Oh, I did come in second at my last one," the blonde admitted almost shyly. "I didn't think that's the type of thing a Gym Leader would be interested in."

"I'm not officially the Gym Leader anymore, my sister took over again, or she should have if she passed the inspection, I'll have to call," she said the last part warily before smiling again.

"Anyway, we host contests and water ballets, and that sounds like something right up their alley too!"

"Water ballets?" Serena perked up. "I've heard about contests but not that! It sounds really cool!"

"You tell me about Performances, and I'll tell you about the ballets?" Misty suggested.

The younger teenage grinned with excitement. "Yeah! Alright, Pokemon Performances... oh wow, where do I start?"

In the back seat, Bonnie watched the two girls talk and grinned. She was worried that they wouldn't like each other, which would have been a shame since she liked them both, and it was nice to see them getting along so willingly.

...

Due to the time difference, they left Kalos very early in the morning, but by the time they reached Pallet Town, it was actually getting late and that was a bad combination with the jet lag that was catching up to them.

Serena yawned but still looked around with interest as they drove through a small town. It was a bit surprising to see that there weren't any big stores, but rather, small ones that were obviously owned by people in the community. Most of them appeared to be either closed or closing though. Arguably the largest building that she had seen was Pokemon Center but even that had to be the smallest one that the girl had ever come across.

She honestly didn't remember much about Pallet Town from her first time in Kanto, just the camp itself, but it was still a lot smaller than she expected. It wasn't a bad thing, just rather quaint. In a

way, it reminded the girl of her hometown.

The Ketchum home was small, and as they all trudged up the wooden porch, Serena had to wonder where they were all going to sleep. It was pretty obvious that everyone was ready to pass out at that point of time.

She jumped back suddenly when a pokemon appeared right in front of her, broom in hand and speaking rapidly to Delia. Serena blinked several times, realizing that it was a Mr. Mime and that it probably belonged to Ash's mother, since she spoke quietly to it before the pokemon scurried off.

"We discussed sleeping arrangements in the car," Delia said to everyone as gathered in the front hall. "Meyer volunteered to sleep on the couch. He said you'd be alright with an air mattress for tonight, Clemont. You and Bonnie can share the spare room."

"Yeah, that's fine," he nodded his head. Clemont didn't really want to let his sister go very far out of sight as it was, so it worked well for him.

"I got the basement finished up finally, so Serena, you and your mother will be staying on the pull-out couch down there. Ash, you can have the air mattress in your room while Misty takes your bed."

Maybe Serena's mind was making things up, but her mother didn't seem to approve of the idea of a boy and a girl sharing a room, but she chose not to bring it up. It wouldn't do any good to argue with their hostess about the sleeping arrangements, especially when they regarded her own son.

Yawning, everyone went to the places Delia and her hyperactive Mr. Mime directed them, all eager to get a good sleep so that they could explore in the morning.

...

Ash yawned, rubbing his eyes as he stumbled into his bedroom, rolled-up air mattress in hand. Misty walked behind him, carrying a slumbering Pikachu.

He took a very brief moment to take in his room for a moment. Once covered in in old blue carpet with pale green walls, toys, posters and just general clutter, it was surprisingly neat now. That had more to do with his mother than him though. The walls had been painted pale blue recently, the carpet exchanged for a wooden floor. His raised bed had been replaced with a bigger one, since he outgrew the small one a while back. The pokeball pattern blankets had been taken away long ago, replaced with a plain green comforter. His toys and posters were gone, replaced with trophies, badges, awards and so many other mementos, but most prominent were the frame pictures of his friends, both human and pokemon.

In that moment, all of the stress and worry faded away, because he was home and home was safe.

Misty's yawn broke him out of his musings, and he looked around at the girl, already in her pyjamas. She set Pikachu into the smaller bed that had been made for him, petting his soft fur. Ash smiled at the sight, and when she looked at him, he said, "I'll take the air mattress, you can go on the bed." The second that he was done speaking, Ash realized that he was just repeating what his mother said earlier, but he was too tired to really care. He dropped the air mattress onto the floor and started to search for the pump to blow it up without much luck.

The redhead rolled her eyes and grabbed his arm, tugging gently. "Don't be stupid, just sleep in the bed." She climbed in first, yanking the comforter out of its neatly tucked-away position, rolling over towards the wall so that she was cocooned within the blankets. Ash snorted with amusement,

because no matter how warm it was (and it was pretty warm in the house, since his mother just turned on the air conditioning), Misty liked curling up in blankets. That worked out fine for him though, since he tended to kick them off.

Flopping down beside her, Ash instantly relished in the feel of being back home and in his own bed, not realizing just how much he had truly missed it until that moment. He yawned again, rolling over onto his side so he could see Misty. He stared at her for a moment before moving his face into his pillow, inhaling the familiar scent of the detergent his mother used.

The teenager thought that it would be hard to fall asleep after everything that had happened, but it came swiftly, and for the first time, he fell asleep feeling completely content and at ease.

...

"Boss?" The woman couldn't hide her annoyance. "Apologies for the interruption, but we have a problem."

"Enter." A deep voice came from the depths of the office.

The woman walked in, running a hand through her bright red hair as she shot an annoyed look over her shoulder. A young man and woman followed her, shoulders slumped and keeping their eyes on the ground.

"What is it?" Giovanni sat behind his desk, his Persian sitting beside the desk and eyeing the two young Grunts.

"I was just informed that these two," she motioned to the younger ones, who winced a bit, "botched one of their last missions. They went for the live-bait tactic and it blew up in their faces. Three people escaped, one of them being a target."

Giovanni's eyes narrowed at the two. "And who was this target?"

Ariana turned on her tablet and looked at the notes inside. "Kanto native Ash Ketchum, though he was subdued in Kalos."

"Who?" The name meant absolutely nothing to him.

"Probably one of the people he wanted," she rolled her eyes behind the screen. "He was low priority, but they made it back to the League."

Giovanni's cold eyes turned to the two Grunts. "How did this happen?"

"His mother and girlfriend got out," the young man spoke up reluctantly. "They uh..."

"They humiliated them and us," Ariana interrupted impatiently. "The girlfriend, she's the Gym Leader from Cerulean City, Misty Waterflower. She beat up our trained Grunts and two women outsmarted them in general."

"We're sorry," the young woman blurted out suddenly. "We swear, Boss, we thought it was under control."

"I keep an eye on promising Grunts rising up in the ranks. You both have good track records, and that's why you were entrusted with low-priority targets. You brought a lot in," Giovanni said suddenly, and they both nodded their heads eagerly.

"They didn't just escape," Ariana broke in. "The Waterflower girl took one of our tablets with highly sensitive information that was meant to be immediately erased, according to these two."

Persian's ears twitched and he looked up at his trainer.

Giovanni's hand fell to the desk. "We should assume then that it has fallen into League hands then?" They both nodded their heads sheepishly.

Giovanni turned in his chair, staring out the window behind him at the brightly lit city below. "That is a mistake I will not tolerate. Both of you wait outside while I decide your punishment."

"Yes Boss," they both said, submissively bowing their heads as they turned to walk out of the room.

"Their punishment?" Ariana asked.

"Get rid of them. I will not tolerate that idiocy."

"And what of the three that escaped?"

Giovanni stared out the window, a smile slowly spreading across his face. Persian walked up to his side, and he rubbed the top of the pokemon's head, earning a purr in response. "It's unacceptable for people to think that they can cause us any sort of humiliation and leave unscathed. The girl who fought her way out, you said it was Cerulean that she was from?"

"Yes, sir. She was the Gym Leader."

"Good. There will be a change of plans of where the First Statement will take place." Giovanni stood up and stared down at the city below him. "Send the order that it will no longer take place in Fuchsia City. The operation will be moved to Cerulean City. Oh, and Ariana? Try not to get blood everywhere again when you deal with the two outside. It was a mess to clean up last time."

"Yes, sir." Ariana turned and walked out of the room and closed the door.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time!

Written by: Skylight Sparkle
Edited by: CLAVUS

The Calm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The crooning of a Dodrio echoed through the open window, causing the young woman splayed out in a small, twin-sized bed to groan and rub her face into her pillow. She settled back down, only for her alarm to go off about five minutes later. With a groan, her dusty-brown eyes shot open and she glared at the beeping device, slamming her small hand down on top of it.

Grunting, Leaf Green shoved herself up into a sitting position, running her fingers through her tangled, light brown hair. She winced as her fingers caught onto some of the knots and slowly got out of her bed. A purple, feline creature stretched at the bottom, blinking her big, violet eyes up at her.

"You can stay asleep, Esp," Leaf stroked her pokemon's head gently. "I gotta get things ready." She grabbed her brush off of her dresser, tackling the mess that was her hair first. Then she headed to the bathroom to take a quick shower. It was all a familiar, mundane process that she went through every single morning.

Once the young woman was clean, she wrapped herself in a towel, ignoring her soaked hair, and went searching for the clothes that she wanted to wear. It took her a few minutes, but she settled on a simple black dress with a turquoise and reddish-pink, hooded vest.

Moving to the kitchen in her simple, one-story home, the teenager rummaged through the kitchen, a bit surprised to actually find edible eggs and bacon. The milk wasn't even expired, and that was a true bonus.

Feeding a couple pieces to a curious Espeon, who only came once she smelled the bacon, Leaf quickly made up breakfast, loading it onto two plates. She set them on the table and made her way back down the hall again.

Without any hesitation, she threw open the door to the room across from hers, not caring that she made an already well-dented wall worse. She walked across the room and shook the woman laying in the bed. "Get up, mom."

"Leaf? What time is it?" Amanda Green's bright blue eyes slowly flickered open, staring at her

daughter tiredly.

"Early."

"Oh. Never mind then."

"Oh no. Get up!" Leaf smacked her hand on the bedside table. "I made you breakfast and everything, so don't sit around like a bum. Again." She turned and stormed out of the room, determined to at least eat her breakfast so that it wouldn't go to waste.

Leaf was almost done by the time her mother stumbled into the room, eliciting a scowl from the teenager. Her mother, once a proud, clever, powerful Pokemon Trainer was nothing but a shadow now. Leaf heard all the stories about Red, Blue and Green, but it was hard to realize that her mother was the trainer known as Green from those stories (though sometimes people got her and Blue mixed up). She highly resembled her mother, with very few of her absent father's features aside from her narrower eyes and the colour. She also had more colour to her skin, but outside of that, their hair was the same shade and naturally fell the same way. Their faces were very similar and even their figures resembled one another. It made it harder for Leaf to try and run from her mother's shadow.

"I'm heading to Professor Oak's," Leaf spoke up as she put the dishes in the sink. "Promised I'd help with a few things there. Do not go back to sleep." She hated having to be the stern one, the adult, but it was just the way it was.

With Espeon at her side, Leaf pulled on her white gloves and made her way out the door, only to stop abruptly when she found herself looking at another pair of eyes.

The Pidgeot tilted her head at the teenager, who repeated the motion. She cooed a bit, looking Leaf over curiously before looking at the house almost questioningly.

"Mom!" Leaf called out. "There's a massive Pidgeot here and I think she's looking for you." She looked the pokemon over, staring with confusion when she realized that there was a bag around it. Reaching out for it, the pokemon hopped away from her and chirped unhappily.

There was shuffling inside as Amanda slowly walked out of the house. For a moment, Leaf thought that her mother was just going to stare at the creature with confusion, but then something happened that surprised her. The woman perked up a bit, eyes going wide with a light that she couldn't remember ever seeing. "Do you know who's it is?"

"Yes, don't worry," Amanda reached out to stroke the bird. "You run along, everything's fine here."

Leaf didn't really believe her, but if this was some sort of job offer or some sort of illegal delivery (or maybe both), she didn't want to be around to see it. Waving her hand, she walked down the road, looking back over her shoulder at the Pidgeot before vanishing out of sight.

Amanda Green watched her daughter walk away before looking back at the Pidgeot. "What did you do this time, Red?"

...

Bonnie was the first one up that morning between her and her brother. She rolled over in the comfortable bed, staying under the big, blue comforter as she looked over the side and down at her brother. Clemont was snoring a little bit, curled up peacefully. Dedenne perked up and stretched out her tiny legs before shaking her head.

Putting a finger to her lips to keep the pokemon quiet, Bonnie reached out and picked her up. Deciding to let her brother sleep for a while longer, the young girl managed to sneak out, Tyrantrum pyjamas and all. She peaked into the open door that led to Delia's room, but seeing no one there, she moved onto the next room that was also cracked open a bit.

She giggled a little bit when she saw Ash splayed out, almost teetering on the edge of his bed, his limbs in every direction, a sheet tossed haphazardly over him. Misty was on the other side of the bed, tucked underneath the blankets, while Pikachu was in his own little bed. It was a good idea, and Bonnie made a mental note to ask her father about getting one for Dedenne. They were both still sound asleep, so she chose to leave them alone.

The blonde skipped down the stairs, Dedenne in hand, smiling when she saw that her father was already up and sipping at a large cup of coffee. Delia was moving around the kitchen rapidly, and glanced over when she heard someone walk into the kitchen.

"Morning, sweetie," Delia cooed happily, much more at ease now that she was back in the walls of her own home. "I hope you like chocolate chip pancakes."

"You bet! Thank you, Mrs. Ketchum," Bonnie walked over to her father. "Morning!"

"You slept alright last night?" Meyer asked his daughter.

"Yeah! Dedenne and I really like it here!" She let go of the pokemon, who hopped up onto the table and was smelling the air.

"Hey now, you shouldn't be on the table," Meyer chided, but Delia just laughed.

"Oh, it's alright. Pikachu does that too." The woman opened a cupboard and took out a canister, tipping some of the contents into a small bowl and setting it in front of Dedenne. "Here you go."

Bonnie sat at the table, watching with interest as the fairy-type sniffed the food, picked up a piece and nibbled on it. Her eyes went wide and she cooed happily before digging into the rest. The blonde girl laughed happily. "She likes it."

"Most pokemon adore Brock's homemade pokemon chow," Delia laughed as she turned to finish the rest of the pancakes. "I always told him he should try to sell it."

"Good morning," Grace chimed as she came up from the basement, Serena following her while still in her pyjamas.

"Was downstairs okay? I had it redone for when Ash had a lot of friends over but I wasn't sure..." Delia trailed off and shrugged.

"It was fine, thank you," Serena said as she sat beside Bonnie. "Is Clemont still asleep?"

"Yeah he—." They both looked at the ceiling when they heard a loud thump and a yelp of surprise. The next thing anyone knew, Mr. Mime flew down the stairs, vacuum in hand and talking wildly to his trainer.

"Oh dear, I told you not to try cleaning them." The brunette sighed and looked at everyone else. "Mimey has a habit of trying to clean everything so if he tries to vacuum you, that's what he's doing."

"Good to know it's not just me," Clemont mumbled as he came into the room, fixing his glasses and pushing the hat he wore while sleeping back out of the way.

"Oh no, it's not—." This time Delia was cut off instead of Bonnie. There was yelling from upstairs, but at the same time it almost sounded like it was outside. They all could tell it was Ash, but he didn't seem annoyed or anything. They couldn't make out what he was yelling but it sounded excited. Then a feminine yell came from outside in response and Delia just laughed and shook her head, moving towards the door.

...

Leaf lived fairly far away from Professor Oak's ranch. Not only did he have a massive amount of land and lived at the very edge of Pallet because of it, but she also lived in the slightly sketchier part. Her mother, though renowned for her part in helping bring down Team Rocket years before, along with Master Red and another trainer named Blue, had never really gone on to do much with herself. Sometimes she vanished for a while, leaving her daughter on her own, before coming back with a hefty bank account. Leaf never questioned it when she was younger, she just went to stay with the Ketchums, but as she got older, all kinds of horrible ideas entered her mind about what her mother did.

Those ideas seemed to spread around Pallet Town. People avoided her mother, people avoided her, but she never let that get her down. She had her close friends and that was all that mattered to her. The brunette never found out what it was that her mother did when she vanished, but she chose not to focus on it. When she was home, Leaf spent most of her time at Professor Oak's lab or at Delia Ketchum's house, rather than in her own house. There were some things that she just didn't want to know.

Either way, they lived in a small house on one side of town and her destination was on the opposite side. Pallet Town was so small in the fact that it had no houses, but it was pretty big area wise, so it was quite the walk.

"Leaf! Hey Leaf!"

She jumped, not expecting someone to actually yell at her. Looking around, she saw a familiar house first, and then looked up at the second story window where a very familiar person was leaning dangerously out the ledge of it.

"Ash?" She called back. "What are you doing here? I thought you were in Kalos!"

"Yeah, things happen!" He yelled back. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to Professor Oak's!"

"Cool! Come inside! My Kalos friends are here too and we can all go!"

"Would you stop yelling!" Leaf's lips ticked up into a smile as Misty appeared beside him. The redhead glared down at her too. "I was trying to sleep! I'm tired!"

"Keeping her up all night, huh?!"

"Leaf!" Ash waved his arms around wildly. "There's a little girl here somewhere and she might be listening!" He started to teeter forward, but Misty grabbed the back of his shirt and tugged him back.

Leaf snickered a bit and was about to yell back when the front door opened. She smiled sweetly, fixing the hem of her black dress and blinking her pale brown eyes at Delia innocently. "Good morning, Mrs. Ketchum. I hope you're having a good day."

Delia laughed and nodded. "Come inside, I'm making chocolate chip pancakes." She walked to the edge of the deck and leaned over. "And you, young man! Come down and eat! I left you some new clothes up there but come eat first before you mess them up!" She motioned to Leaf to come inside.

Leaf wet her lips and looked down the road. The brunette could admit to herself that she was very curious about why Ash was back. Coverage for foreign leagues wasn't very good in Pallet Town so she didn't get any information about Kalos, but she knew that the league would have just ended.

Though she already ate, the thought of Delia's chocolate chip pancakes also sealed the deal, so she happily walked into the familiar fence and up the stairs. The people inside were anything but familiar though.

"Leaf, these are Ash's friends from Kalos," Delia introduced. "Serena, Clemont, and his sister Bonnie. Grace here is Serena's mother and Meyer is Clemont and Bonnie's father. Everyone, this is Leaf Green."

"Hi," the brunette eyed each person curiously. The teenage girl tugged at the pink bow in her hair self-consciously while the boy just stared bashfully. The little girl in a pokemon costume looked positively excited.

"Hi! Wow, you're pretty! Are all of Ash's friends pretty?" Bonnie asked excitedly. Her attention was quickly taken to the plate of pancakes that were set in front of her.

"Thank you," Leaf smiled at the young girl, even if she wasn't paying attention anymore. Her attention was drawn back to the other teenager, Serena, and she narrowed her eyes slightly. "You look really familiar."

"I do?" Serena looked up with wide eyes. "Well... I was at a summer camp here when I was really young."

Putting a hand on her hip, Leaf tried to think back, keeping her gaze on Serena the entire time. The other girl shifted uncomfortable, tugging a little bit at her short hair. Leaf's eyes suddenly went wide. "Oh! You were that girl who was scared of the Poliwag! The one Ash helped!"

"Yeah," the blonde shrunk down in her chair a bit.

"Stop embarrassing her, Leaf," Misty spoke up as she came into the room, still wearing her pyjama shorts and tank top. She nudged her, and Leaf grinned back.

"I'll be nice," the brunette sighed. She glanced around when she saw Ash skid into the room. "There you are. I thought you'd be all over those pancakes the second you smelled them." She reached out, scratching Pikachu's head as the pokemon jumped up onto the table.

In a childish action, he stuck his tongue out at her and accepted his plate from his mother. There wasn't enough room at the table, so he stayed standing. Misty did the same, so Leaf decided to just stand with them.

"So," Ash spoke up after a few moments of everyone eating in silence, looking at his seated friends, "I was thinking we could go to Professor Oak's ranch. He has a lot of pokemon there, including all of mine. My friend, Tracey, works and lives there."

"That sounds like fun," Clemont agreed with a nod of his head as he ate.

"Gary's home too," Delia added. "I think it would be good for you guys to go there. Maybe you could go down to Pallet Beach for the day. Swing by here after, and I'll make you all lunch to take

with you." Though it was just a suggestion, the way the woman said it made it sound like there was really no room for arguing.

"I'm in!" Misty almost cheered, setting down her plate after gulping the rest down. "I call dibs on the shower first!" She tore out of the room so quickly that it actually made Leaf chuckle.

After eating, she chose to wait outside rather than in the hectic Ketchum house. Having been the first one upstairs to get ready, Misty was the first one out, sitting on the steps beside Leaf. Wearing a yellow, off-the-shoulder top over a red tank top with a pair of jean shorts, the older girl tugged at her long hair, pulling it from the ponytail that she had on the top of her head and glaring at it.

"Just leave it down," Leaf laughed.

"It drives me crazy," Misty grumbled before looking over at her. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. Kind of curious about what's going on here though," she nodded back towards the house as she fiddled with the cuff of her white glove. "Seemed a little tense with the parents there."

"You don't know?" The redhead looked genuinely surprised, letting her thick locks fall down around her shoulders as she turned her attention to the other girl. "Team Rocket wanted Ash for some reason. They took Delia and I to get him to cooperate once they got him, but they took Bonnie with him so he wouldn't resist in the car or something like that. Delia and I busted us out."

Leaf's eyes narrowed and she stared at her friend for a moment. "That's the single most ridiculous plan I've ever heard. Why not just knock him out and not have to worry about other people? Why didn't he just use his Aura?" She shook her head. "Why'd they take him?"

"We have no idea. We took a tablet from them though and... there was a huge list of targets on it." Misty looked around, as if searching for someone listening, before lowering her voice. "A lot of them were listed as exterminated. I have no idea what's going on though. The Champion there and here were talking about it though."

"Now I see why Mrs. Ketchum wants you to just go have some fun." She looked up as Ash came out of the house, sitting beside Misty and concentrating on the red laces of the grey boots he had on. "That's an awful lot of black for you. Don't tell me you're going emo on us?"

Startled, Ash stared at her blankly before reaching up and touching his new, primarily black hat and glancing at his shirt. He snorted and stared back at her. "My mom apparently made me these."

"That's so cute that your mother not only has to dress you, but she makes your clothes," Leaf teased.

Pointing at her from the opposite side of Misty, he said, "I bet my mom made you that vest." Her cheeks turned red. "Ha! I knew it!"

"Knew what?" Bonnie asked as she came out with both Dedenne and Pikachu trailing her. Why they stuck close to her became obvious when she reached into her blue bag that was slung across her puffy-sleeved, brown and purple shirt, and pulled out a treat for each of them. She laughed when they both took the treats and started nibbling on them.

"That Leaf's a jerk," Ash answered seriously, rubbing his arm when the girl in question lurched across Misty to punch his arms. "Ow! Uncalled for!"

"Don't be a wimp, Ketchum!"

"I'm not sure I want to know," Clemont muttered as he came out, fixing one of the straps of his pale blue, work overalls. Finally fixing it, he smiled and looked around. "Huh, where's Serena?"

"I'm here!" The teenager rushed out, fixing her hat and then smoothing out the layered skirt made out of multiple shades of red. She fixed her hat on top of her head and smiled. "There, a new look for a new adventure!"

Leaf glanced at Misty curiously, but the redhead just shrugged and stood up. Following her lead, she took a few steps forward and said, "Professor Oak's lab isn't far from here. Lets go."

...

Tracey enjoyed working with Professor Oak and would never say that he regretted it, but sometimes he wished he had the opportunity to sit down and draw some of the amazing things that he came across, often just by taking care of the pokemon that stayed there.

He was lucky that day. Gary was there and decided to help out so they got the basic chores and things that needed to be done finished fairly quickly. The pokemon were fed and in their proper spots, the paperwork and computers were all up to date and working properly. Neither of them had even seen the Professor all morning after he dashed about the lab faster than a man his age had any right to.

They both decided to spend some time outside with their pokemon, Tracey taking the opportunity to draw some of the pokemon around the ranch. Gary was laying down not far from him, leaning against his Arcanine's side while reading a book leisurely.

Tracey, on the other hand, was focusing on Bulbasaur that had been rocking a rather small Oddish in an attempt to calm it down. It was truly fascinating how, though Bulbasaur was much smaller than many of the pokemon there, he always ended up taking the role of caretaker.

Tracey smiled as he watched the tear-free Oddish run off to play somewhere else, but his smile twisted into an expression of confusion as he watched a very familiar Pikachu run up to Bulbasaur.

"Saur!"

"Pika!" Bulbasaur hopped onto his hind-legs and the two exchanged a strange looking hug.

Gary looked up from his book, raising an eyebrow with confusion. "Hey isn't that..." He trailed off, looking at something over Tracey's shoulder, a smile appearing on his face as he stood up. "Ashy-boy! It's been a while!"

Tracey twisted around, blinking rapidly as he recognized his younger friend approaching. Misty, Leaf, and a couple other people he didn't know were stumbling after the energetic teenager.

"Gary! Tracey!" Ash waved and laughed, his voice carrying over the yard. Bulbasaur looked away from Pikachu, practically sprinting over to Ash and nuzzling his leg. "Hey buddy! It's been a while, huh?"

"Bulba saur baur!"

The ground began to shake a bit beneath their feet, and Tracey saw Misty and Leaf push the other three out of the way. It was a smart move, and was one that he and Gary quickly copied, moving out of the way just as a stampede of pokemon rushed by them. A moment later, Ash was completely surrounded by a slew of excited pokemon.

"Stop guys!" Ash laughed loudly, trying to reach out to pet every single one of them. It wasn't an easy feat, since a lot of them were big, evolved creatures.

"Should we help him?" Clemont asked Misty, blue eyes flickering uncertainly.

"No way!" Bonnie cried out, practically bouncing on the spot. "Who doesn't want to be in a big pokemon pile like that?"

Serena eyed the horn of a Samurott warily. "Me?"

Misty completely ignored the pokemon, walking around them to reach the two other young men. "Hey Tracey! Gary!"

"Hey," Tracey couldn't even try to hide his surprise. He (and Daisy) had assumed that Misty would end up staying in Kalos with Ash for a little while, no matter how the tournament there panned out. "What are you doing back so soon?"

"That's a long story," the teenager shook her head and then looked around at the three blondes standing with her and Leaf. "Oh, right! Tracey, Gary, this is Serena, Bonnie and Clemont! Guys, this is Tracey and Gary!"

Leaf leaned in a bit towards them and added, "Don't trust Gary. He might seem adorable but he's really not."

"Aww Leaf, you think I'm adorable?" The brunet raised an eyebrow at her.

"No, I just said you're not," she corrected without hesitation.

Tracey shook his head and smiled at them. "Well, it's nice to meet you guys! When did you get in?"

"Last night," Misty answered. She was about to say something else, but was distracted by several flashes of light.

They all looked around as five more pokemon appeared, all of which Tracey had seen before since Ash tried to rotate his pokemon fairly regularly. There was one amongst them that was even more familiar. "Hey Ria." He enjoyed talking to Ash's fighting-type pokemon, especially when she chose to respond back with her telepathy, though that was a rare thing.

The small Lucario nodded her head in acknowledgment, the sunlight glinting off of a sparkly bow that was wrapped around one of her ears. The bow and the smooth, primarily orange stone at the center seemed so out of place on a pokemon whose breed was known to be rather serious, but Ria had a fascination with glittery things and they all knew it.

Surprising all of them, she didn't jump into the herd of pokemon. She was normally the type to get over-excited at this type of thing. Instead, she just leaned back and stared up at the sky.

"Huh, Kalos pokemon," Gary leaned forward a bit to look at some of them. "I knew Ash had some, but I've never actually seen them." He was quick to look back at the others. "That little electric-type is Dedenne, right?"

"That's right!" Bonnie nodded her head, hugging the pokemon close to her chest. "She's going to be my starter when I can finally be a trainer, right Dedenne?"

"Denne denne!"

There was another rumbling, and all of them looked around in time to see the herd of Tauros finally join the rest of the mess before them. Serena, Clemont and Bonnie just watched on with awe and confusion, not even able to see their friend anymore, while Misty and Tracey exchanged exasperated looks.

"I'll get Venusaur to get him," Leaf said with a grin, not even trying to hide her amusement. Her fingers danced over the pokeballs attached to the inside of her vest, but instead of grabbing one, she jumped when a loud roar echoed above them.

A large shadow swooped overhead, and a couple of the pokemon scattered just as Charizard managed to fly down low enough to grab Ash out of the pile of pokemon. The fire-type landed a little bit away, setting his trainer on the ground and blowing a puff of flames in his face.

"Yeah, yeah, thank you," Ash replied sarcastically, rubbing the bit of ash off of his face. Most pokemon could control the type of power they outputted, so Charizard's flames never actually hurt him, not even when he was younger. It was the same as the electricity Pikachu hit him with from time to time.

"Holy Mew," Serena took a few steps forward, bright blue eyes going wide. "That's a huge Charizard."

"He must be strong," Clemont added.

"Don't say that," Ash groaned. "It'll go straight to his head and he'll be... well... a jerk." Charizard lightly smacked him and the raven-haired teenager laughed before looking at the other people there. "We wanted to come and visit the pokemon here for a bit, but my mom said we should go to Pallet Beach. Wanna come?"

"Sure, why not?" Gary shrugged. "Not like there'll be many people there. Not in our spot anyway."

"I'll kick them out if they are," Leaf assured him with a firm nod.

"I don't know. Professor Oak was awfully busy and all over the place this morning, maybe I should stay here," Tracey frowned a bit.

Gary rolled his eyes. "Gramps will be fine. Taking a couple hours off won't kill you or anything. We'll go talk to him while Ash gets mauled by his pokemon."

"Thanks," the boy in question saluted his friend sarcastically before yelping as a tall grass-type pokemon suddenly lunged forward, nuzzling him. "Meganium! Hi there! I was wondering where you went."

"That's Ash's real girlfriend," Gary muttered to Serena and Clemont. They looked at him oddly.

"Shut up and go talk to Professor Oak!" Ash called out to him, earning a chuckle in response.

Tracey had to admit, spending some time at the beach would be nice, and he was awfully curious about whatever happened in Kalos. Deciding that he would ask Professor Oak for the rest of the day off (not that he had been doing much), he headed towards the lab, Gary trailing behind him to no doubt ask the same.

Behind them, Ash's pokemon crowded around all of the other trainers, but the two young men didn't look back once.

...

Serena adjusted the sunglasses over her blue eyes to keep the sun from blinding her. The light wind was warm, only enhancing the smell of the salty air and the sound of the waves gently lapping against the shore. Pallet Beach was a little farther away than she expected, at least the spot they ended up going to, but it was definitely beautiful.

She looked up, hearing a splash and a laugh. From the moment they got there, Misty had leapt into the waves and had yet to come back out. Bonnie was playing with her in the shallow water, laughing happily. Clemont was at the edge of the ocean, kneeling next to Gary and Tracey with a strange device out, motioning to the water and back to it. Whatever new invention it was, it had the other two completely fascinated. The pokemon all opted to stay at Professor Oak's ranch, though from the shadow that lurked overhead from time to time, she knew that Ash's Charizard kept checking up on them. Ash just explained it as the pokemon being a bit overprotective.

The blonde tilted her head, looking in the other direction where Ash and Leaf were kneeling on the beach, whispering and motioning wildly to the sand. Serena raised an eyebrow, and deciding that she had done enough laying around, got up and walked over to them. "What are you guys doing?"

"We're going to bury Gary when he finally falls asleep," Leaf said with a nod of her head, and the other girl squinted with confusion, earning a laugh from the brunette. "I'm kidding. We're going to make a kickass sandcastle. Wanna help?"

"A sandcastle?" That seemed a little juvenile to her, but she decided not to mention that, seeing how excited the other two were. "Well, sure?"

"Great! Cause we need another person that can run into the water and not worry about dying thanks to the Tentacool that are here at this time of year."

"Hey, I said I'd go," Ash pointed out.

"And as funny as it'd be to see you try to outrun them, your girlfriend would kick my ass all the way to Sinnoh," Leaf retorted dryly. Her expression became friendly again when she looked up. "So, you in?"

Serena shrugged and knelt down. She had nothing else to do, and it would be fun to just act a little bit silly. Relaxing after everything that had happened was the reason that they came to Kanto, after all. "Sure, why not?"

"We're going to set up a bonfire later," Ash told her suddenly as they started gather up wet sand. His eyes went wide with excitement. "We even have marshmallows and everything!"

"Sounds fun!" Serena laughed, honestly happy to see him happy again.

"Always thinking of your stomach, I swear," Leaf sighed as she tried straightening up the sand. They didn't actually have any buckets or anything to make a solid structure with, so they just had to work with their hands.

Ash just flickered a little bit of mud at her, and Serena laughed a bit. Though she just got to meet these people, Leaf, Tracey, Gary and even Misty, she already liked them.

It was nice to just be together and have fun without something terrible following them around.

...

It was amazing how relieving it was to be home. It was like every single problem in the world faded away. Ash stretched his arms out above his head, staring up at the darkening sky with a

smile on his face. Pikachu was playing with Dedenne, running away from the gentle waves, while the rest of them were gathered around a bonfire that was slowly dying down to embers. It had been a long, wonderfully normal and relaxing day.

Though the sun had set, the air was still fairly warm, so none of them were in a hurry to get back home. Towels, coolers and other things were all packed up, ready and waiting for when they would have to leave, but they all took their time.

Bonnie had nodded off at some point of time while they were sharing stories, leaning against her brother's leg as she snored peacefully. Clemont, in turn, was talking eagerly to Gary about an invention. Something about instant translations. At least that's what Ash thought he said.

Leaf shifted beside him, and Ash glanced at his childhood friend curiously. She was staring at the two boys thoughtfully, frowning a little bit.

"That's really impressive," Gary said when Clemont was done explaining his invention. The brunet nodded his head. "It would be really helpful to a lot of people. Yeah, I'm definitely impressed."

"Careful," Leaf smirked a little bit, the same smile Ash remembered from when they were younger and she would purposely get Gary riled up. "Gary's got a crush on you now and that's never a good thing."

Clemont appeared startled and Gary rolled his viridian eyes. "If I did, it would be a lot more obvious. I mean, don't you always feel the need to point out that I bring way too many girls home? Or is that just you being jealous?"

Serena glanced at Ash with confusion, but he shook his head. Misty leaned in a bit, looking rather eager to see where this argument was going to go. Tracey just rolled his eyes because he had heard this same type of thing nearly every time both Leaf and Gary were in Pallet Town.

"Jealous, of you?" Leaf's tone was suddenly much more guarded. She snorted. "Please. Of a fake ladies man like you?"

"Fake?" Gary repeated.

"I call it like I see it." She crossed her arms in front of her chest and smirked. "You're grandpa's good little boy. You go on like your a dating machine half the time, but we all know you're the only one here—from Kanto—," she held up her hands to Clemont and Serena, "who is still a virgin. From the way you always try to brag yourself up, that must be important, right?"

"I don't try to... wait... what?" Gary looked over at Tracey, who just shrugged, not denying anything. His eyes then turned towards Ash. "Okay there's no way..." He trailed off as he saw both Ash and Misty's faces turn brilliant shades of red. "What? When did that happen and why wasn't I told? Why does Leaf know?"

"That's what I'd like to know too," Misty said through gritted teeth, narrowing her eyes at Ash.

In response, the brown-eyed boy just motioned wildly to Leaf, who looked rather proud of herself for making Gary so gobsmacked. "I didn't mean to! It just slipped! You told your sisters!"

"Can we please not talk about this?" Clemont called out suddenly, eyes darting between his sister and Serena. On one hand, he really didn't want Bonnie to wake up and here this type of conversation. On the other, he could see the way Serena was keeping her eyes locked onto the ground, her shoulders slumped a bit.

"Well he—."

"No," Clemont stressed again. "We should go. Tide's gonna come in soon." While also a desperate attempt to halt the conversation, it still was true.

"He's right," Tracey came to the rescue, and the blond decided that it made him his favourite person out of Ash's other friends at the moment. "We need to get up early to help around the ranch too. Might as well head back."

The other four, all glaring at each other interchangeably, nodded and left to get their things. Clemont looked over at Serena, who sighed a bit. "Hey, you wanna carry Bonnie while I get the bags?"

"Sure." Serena lifted the girl without much of a struggle. She watched Ash, Misty, Leaf and Gary, who were all whispering and snipping at one another. "Clemont?"

"Yeah?"

"He really does love her, doesn't he?"

Blue eyes looked up, and the teenage boy regarded his friend closely. She was sad, that much was obvious, but there was something else behind her eyes too. Maybe it was the beginning of acceptance, he didn't know. Throwing his bag, hers and Bonnie's onto his bag, he stood up. "I'm sorry, Serena."

"No," she shook her head, short locks of hair swaying around her face. "I can accept it, if that's the reason."

Clemont glanced towards the black-haired boy and the orange-haired girl, who were now whispering to each other, ignoring Leaf and Gary entirely. "Yeah. I really think he does. She does too."

Serena nodded her head, and, much to his surprise, smiled. She glanced at Bonnie and then looked at him. "We should start heading back."

"Yeah." He started following her across the sand. "Did you at least have fun today?"

"I did," Serena nodded her head, her voice genuine. "I hope tomorrow is just as good, but if it's not, at least we got today."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: CLAVUS

The Storm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Eyes gazed down at him, red and green mixing together into a pleading stare.

"It is coming."

"What is?"

"It."

"I don't understand."

"You must be ready."

"Ready for what?"

"It."

"But what is it?"

There was silence as they stared at one another.

"I am sorry, Ash Ketchum. So very sorry."

...

"Ash," a desperate whisper reached him in his sleep as a hand grabbed his arm, shaking him. "Ash, wake up. Now."

"Huh? Mom?" He opened his eyes, staring up at the blurry outline of his mother with confusion, wondering why she ripped him out of his very strange dream. He sat up and wiped his eyes to clear up his vision. The raven-haired teenager looked upwards, a bit startled to see tears in her eyes, and her hands shaking. "What's wrong?"

"Shh," she whispered, her bright brown eyes glancing over to where Misty was sleeping peacefully

beside him. "Come here. There's something you need to see."

He didn't hesitate to slide out of the bed as quickly as he could, not bothering to change out of his boxers and tank top. Stumbling down the stairs after his mother, she led him into the living room, where Meyer and Grace were both sitting together, staring at the television with looks of horror on their faces. No one else was awake. "Mom? What's going on?"

With shaky hands, Delia motioned to the television and turned the volume back on, but keeping it low so that it wouldn't wake up anyone else.

Ash stared at the screen, not quite sure what he was looking at. It looked like houses and buildings surrounded by rushing water. There were debris, people on rooftops, and it didn't really occur to him what he was looking at.

"For those tuning in," a newscaster spoke over the footage. "What you're seeing is the devastation left behind in Cerulean City after a sudden and unexplained tsunami that originated from beyond Cerulean Cape. The death toll is unknown as more and more officials and first responders come to help with the situation. The Prime Minister has said in an earlier statement that they will do everything in their power to help as many people as they can. No statement has been released by Champion Lance or the Indigo Plateau. However, officials are asking for civilians to remain home at this time and not to come."

Ash's hands gripped the back of the couch as his eyes went wide. "What? How's that... how's that possible?" His mind was racing because Cerulean City wasn't that close to the ocean. How could a tsunami possibly cause that much devastation to the city itself?

Then it hit him why his mother woke him up to show before anyone else. His stomach clenched and he wasn't sure whether he wanted to vomit or cry. "Misty's sisters. Were they... has anyone heard from them?" Ash looked at his mother with wide eyes and she shook her head.

The teenage closed his eyes and took a couple deep breaths. Delia put her hand on his shoulder, but he jerked back as a bit of resentment welled up in him. She woke him up to show him first so that he could tell Misty what happened. He didn't want to be the one to tell her about this. At the same time though, he didn't want anyone else to either. He just wanted to hide her from it.

Ash knew he couldn't do that though. So he turned around and slowly made his way back up the stairs and to his room. He walked inside and realized that Pikachu was already awake, curled up beside Misty but staring at him with worry.

The raven-haired boy sat back down on his bed, scratching Pikachu's ear slightly before motioning for the pokemon to move. Pikachu quickly switched positions, running to the end of the bed and watching with wary eyes as Ash put his hand on Misty's shoulder lightly.

"Mist," he took a deep breath and shook her very gently. "Misty. You need to wake up." Ash winced as his voice cracked, unable to keep it steady.

"Ash?" She rolled over and looked at him before sitting up quickly, recognizing the fact that he was very upset quickly. "What happened?" He opened his mouth but couldn't really say anything, fighting against the tears that threatened to fall because he wasn't the one who needed comfort, even if she didn't realize it yet. "Ash..." Misty trailed off, reaching up and touching his cheek. "What's wrong?"

"Misty..." He trailed off, not quite sure what to say. "Something really bad happened. Really bad. And I don't..."

"What? Is your mom okay?"

That made Ash really want to cry. Of course she's be worried about him first. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "Everything's fine here but... it's anything but fine in Cerulean."

...

Gary ran as fast as he could up the path to the front door, slamming his hand on the old wood roughly. A moment later, a startled brunette appeared at the door.

"What the hell, Oak?" Leaf stared at him. "What are you doing?"

"I know you don't have a TV here so you wouldn't know, but you need to come with me, now," Gary spoke quickly, grabbing her gloved hand and yanking her forward.

"Gary!" She jerked her arm out of his grip, eyes both annoyed and worried. "What the hell? At least let me close the door!" He waited less than a split second after she closed the door and started dragging her forward again. "I swear to Arceus, Oak, if you keep man-handling me, I will break your arm! Where are you dragging me?"

"Ash's house," he said said as he hurried towards the car that he had taken to drive across the narrow roads of Pallet Town as quickly as he could. "A tsunami hit Cerulean City. A bad one."

"What?" Leaf stared at him blankly, expecting some sort of laugh, just another obnoxious joke. It never came. Gary just grimly opened the passenger seat door and waited for her to get in. She quickly climbed in and he closed it behind her, moving around to the driver's side and getting in. He hadn't even turned off the car, just put it in neutral and ran. He jammed it into drive and started going. "That doesn't make sense. For a tsunami to hit Cerulean, it would have had to be record high! Not to mention if something can come that far in land, it would have had to hit other places too."

"I know," he replied, "but it didn't. It doesn't make sense, unless you take out the idea that it was natural." He took his viridian eyes off of the road just for a moment to meet her own.

Brow furrowing, Leaf stared at him for a moment before her eyes went wide. "A legendary pokemon. You think a legendary pokemon did it?"

"I don't know what I think, just that Gramps has been talking to people all morning and the topic of legendary pokemon comes up when he doesn't think I'm listening," Gary told her.

"Okay but why are we going to Ash's..." she trailed off as the answer to her own question came to her. "Misty. Oh god, her sisters... Tracey. Where is he?"

"I dropped him off at Ash's before coming to get you. Didn't think anyone should be alone."

Leaf stared out the front windshield of the car, biting her lip as her hands twisted together. He was right, no one should be alone, not for something like this.

...

Delia made them all get ready for the day. She sent every single one of them, even Meyer and Grace, up to have showers and get dressed. She was stern and made them all eat even just a few bites of something. Serena wasn't quite sure what to make of this, since she only felt sick at the thought of what had happened. How Misty was able to get through it all was something else.

They all stood around the television earlier, just staring. Bonnie didn't quite understand, Clemont was horrified, and she felt like crying, but Misty had just stared at the live news broadcast like it wasn't even real. Not even after Tracey came into the house, puffy-eyed and worried, did she say anything.

"Why don't you try to talk to her?" Serena asked Ash in passing. He was her boyfriend, surely he should be doing something.

Ash shook his head and watched the other girl sadly. "She won't talk if you push her. I'll just have to wait for her first." Serena wasn't too sure about that advice, but decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. The two were best friends, after all.

Serena was brushing her hair up in the bathroom when she heard a sudden growl of frustration. She looked around quickly, her dark blonde locks flying into her eyes, before quickly leaving the room. She hesitated a bit outside of Ash's room, but walked in anyway.

Misty was kneeling on the floor, trying to rip a brush through her still wet, tangled hair. She finally managed to get the brush out of the tangles, causing Serena to wince.

"Stupid hair!" Misty threw the brush to the floor and grabbed at the loose, orange locks, tugging at them sharply. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

"Here, let me do it," Serena spoke calmly as she knelt down beside the older girl. If Misty was startled at all, she didn't let on. Serena reached up and gently pried Misty's hands away from her hair. She looked around the room, spying a hair dryer and got up to get that, plugging it into the closest power outlet.

The redhead didn't protest at all, so Serena started brushing through her wet hair gently, trying not to tug it while drying it at the same time. It was a little bit of a process but as soon as she felt she had most of the big tangles out, she turned on the hairdryer and started using it. Neither one of them said anything, and Misty just knelt there, watery eyes staring at the floor as she took deep, slow breaths.

Once it was dry, Serena frowned a bit before nodding her head. "I'll be back." She got up, going back to the bathroom and grabbing her own bag that she had brought up with her to get ready. Hurrying back to the room and dropping it on the floor, she knelt down beside Misty again, digging through the bag, trying to find an elastic. Serena mentally cursed the fact that she didn't seem to have that many on her, but she didn't really need them after cutting her hair. The blonde's hand ran into something soft and she pulled it out. Realizing that it was just her old, dark grey top, she was about to throw it aside but stopped when she spied a blue ribbon on it.

Serena bit her lip for a moment, glancing at the other girl who had yet to move. The teenager then shook her head, wondering why she was hesitating at all. She pulled the ribbon off of the shirt. Turning back to Misty, she brought her hair forward over her shoulder, at the base of her neck, and using the ribbon, tied it into a simply ponytail. She tied it so that there weren't any big, visible bows, already knowing that Misty wasn't the type for that. Once she was done, Serena leaned back a bit and nodded. "There." She grabbed her portable mirror to show her. "What do you think?"

Misty's sea-green eyes lifted from the floor as she stared at the mirror, a very tiny smile appearing on her face. "Thank you, Serena."

"It's no problem," Serena smiled at her as encouragingly as she could, despite the situation, "we're friends, right?"

"Yeah. We're friends." Misty looked down at the floor, blinking rapidly.

The younger of the two reached out, but stopped mid-way, pulling her hand back and clutching it to her chest. "Do you want me to go get Ash?" Serena honestly expected the redhead to say no, and was slightly surprised when she nodded her head. "Alright, I'll be right back."

She grabbed her bag so that she could continue getting ready, but didn't run because she didn't want to startle anyone. Serena found Ash in the living room, watching Tracey, who was continually trying to make calls to anyone that might have information on the Waterflower sisters. He had been doing that since before she went upstairs to get ready. "Ash?"

"Hmm?" The raven-haired teenage looked towards her, his eyes wary and tired.

"Misty wants you." He nodded his head, quickly walking by her and towards the stairs. Serena watched him go, but her attention was quickly drawn back to the television, brow furrowing. "What the?"

"Is there something else on the TV?" Clemont asked her, coming in from the kitchen.

"No, I just thought I saw it flash. I thought there was a man on it," she admitted with a shrug.

"Might be a different signal that they accidentally put through for a second. It happens sometimes."

"Yeah..." She trailed off, her stomach clenching uncomfortably though Serena had no idea why. She just got the gut feeling that something else was going to happen.

...

"Misty?" Ash peered into his room, spying the redhead sitting the bed, her back against the wall, her knees pulled up to her chest, smart phone in hand. From the sounds of it, she was listening to an online news broadcast. She didn't acknowledge him, but he walked in anyway, sitting beside her and just waiting.

There was nothing new on the news, and Tracey was trying his hardest to get through to the lines that the public was told to call as more and more people were rescued from the destroyed city. There was nothing else that they could do, though a part of Ash knew that Misty wanted to just take off to Cerulean City to try and help people herself. Hell, he wanted to go too.

Misty dropped the phone and was still for a moment, then she lifted her head up and met his eyes. Her lip trembled and her eyes watered. "Violet just came home." Her voice wavered. "She's pregnant and now... I didn't even call them to tell them I was back." Then she broke. Her entire body shook as the sobs that had been building up in her all morning finally escaped.

Ash slipped closer to her, moving an arm over her shoulder. She curled up into him, pressing her forehead into the crook of his neck, her arms going around him as she cried.

Ash didn't say anything. He wasn't going to tell her that it was alright, or that everything would be okay. He didn't know that and he sure as hell wasn't going to lie. Instead, he just wrapped his arms around her, rested his cheek on the top of her head and rubbed her arm. The teenager couldn't stop his mind from going back over the conversation that he had with Violet over the phone. It felt like it happened years ago, yet it had only been days.

His heart clenched painfully at the sound of Misty's sobs and he drew her as close to him as he could. The squeak of the door caught his attention, and Ash was about to scold whoever it was to go away, but seeing Pikachu peek in, he motioned for the pokemon to come in.

Pikachu pushed the door closed and scampered over, stopping in front of Misty, his ears drooping. "Pikachu!." He patted her leg.

"Let's go."

Ash didn't even realize that he spoke until Misty looked up at him and asked, "What? Go where?"

"To Cerulean. I know they said not to, but we'll go and we'll look and we'll try to help other people. I'd love to see them try and stop us from going in on Charizard. Or—or I'll get Garchomp to burrow underneath the ground. You can bring out Gyarados and then what? What can they do? I mean, I'll freak them out with Aura if I have to." He moved so that he was kneeling beside her, his hands on her shoulders. "We'll get Tracey, you know he'll want to help."

Misty's sea-green eyes searched his face before a small smile slowly spread across her features. She nodded her head, pushing herself up onto her knees and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her forehead on his collar bone. "Thank you."

Ash hugged her tightly and nodded. Really though, she should have known by that point of time, he'd do pretty much anything for her.

...

The plan was simple. Ash would sneak over to Tracey and talk to him quietly while everyone was distracted, he'd claim that the three of them were going for a walk to clear their heads, and then they'd stop at Professor Oak's lab to get the pokemon they needed and go.

The raven-haired teenager was surprised to see Gary and Leaf sitting on the couch. He honestly hadn't heard them come in, but it didn't really matter. If they were both there, that meant that they weren't at the lab so it was less people to try and stop them.

He snuck behind the couch quickly, though no one even bothered giving him a second glance, all too focused on the news report where some survivors were talking about the incident.

When he reached him, Ash put a hand on Tracey's shoulder, causing the young man to jump. "Haven't heard anything yet?"

"No. If they survived, they haven't checked in yet," Tracey said glumly, his shoulders slumping. "She was going to come here you know. Daisy? She was going back and forth over the idea of coming here or staying to do some work. She just became the official Gym Leader again. I told her to stay there and get everything done, then she wouldn't have to worry about it." The pain that was rolling off of his friend almost made Ash cringe. "I told her to stay."

"Don't," the younger of the two said sharply. "You'll drive yourself crazy with 'what ifs', trust me on that." Ash lowered his voice. "Misty and I are going to Cerulean City."

"What?" Tracey looked around to see if anyone was listening. "You know we're not allowed."

"They can try to stop us." He paused for a moment. "You wanna come too? Even if the police are saying no because it's too dangerous?"

"Damn right I'm coming," Tracey nodded his head and slowly stood up. He looked around the room where Meyer sat with Clemont and Bonnie, Grace with Serena, and Delia with Gary and Leaf. Misty was hovering by the door, staying out of sight for the most part. "They'll try to stop us."

"No they won't." He grabbed his arm and dragged him towards the door. "Mom! I'm taking Tracey and Misty to get some air! We'll be back in a minute."

"Did you want us to come with you?" Bonnie asked, her eyes going wide at the prospect of getting out of the house.

Feeling a little bit bad, Ash shook his head. "Nah. We'll be fine. We'll be back soon." He nodded to Misty, who walked towards the door with Pikachu in hand.

The three were quick to get outside, and Tracey took a deep breath. "I need to get my pokemon from Professor Oak's. I just... I left them all there this morning."

"We were going there anyway," Ash insisted. "I need to get a few specific ones."

Nodding, Tracey led the way down the road, Ash on one side of him and Misty on the other, Pikachu sitting on her shoulder. "Ria would never forgive you if you left her behind," the redhead spoke up.

"Don't I know it," Ash sighed, his fingers running along the metal band around his wrist. "Need her anyway. She and I are the best shots we have of seeing if there are people in places. So we don't run into buildings that are about to collapse."

"Sometimes I forget about your Aura," Tracey admitted. The young man, and his mother, were the only two people that Ash shared his ability with, who hadn't been with him when he was using it at some point of time. He honestly felt bad about keeping such a huge secret away from some of his friends, namely Serena, Clemont, Bonnie, Iris and Cilan, but the teenage found himself unable to keep it from Tracey. It might have been the amount of time they had known each other, and the fact that Tracey could definitely keep a secret. "You're right though, it will be really helpful."

"I try to plan ahead," Ash replied with a smile. Misty raised an eyebrow at him. "Sometimes," he amended.

Professor Oak's lab wasn't very far from the Ketchum house, but the second that they stepped onto the property, all three knew that something was wrong. It was entirely too quiet.

"All the pokemon are in their pokeballs," Ash said, frowning a bit when he realized he couldn't feel any of the pokemon out and about. "Why would they do that?"

"I don't know. The Professor usually doesn't unless it's an emergency, like a big storm or something," Tracey sounded just as confused. He led the way up into the lab that was just as quiet and empty. Walking down one of the halls, they heard hushed voices coming from one of the rooms.

"Who's in there?" Misty asked her boyfriend, her fingers dancing along the edge of the pokeballs that she had on her belt.

"Professor Oak, some people I don't recognize and some that seem really familiar but I..." Ash shook his head. "If I know them, I haven't seen them in a long time."

"Well, lets hurry before they come out." Tracey walked down to the massive storage room that held all of the pokeballs of the pokemon that Professor Oak housed. Each of them were sectioned off under individual trainer names, the pokemon labelled for quick access. Not all trainers from Pallet Town chose to leave their pokemon with him, some left them at home, and others took advantage of the Pokemon League's system of leaving the pokeballs in computers. Pokemon didn't mind, to them it was just like taking a nap in suspended animation, or so they said, at least. There

still were quite a few at Professor Oak's ranch though.

There was a large screen on the wall that was playing the events in Cerulean, reminding Ash again about what they were going to do. They couldn't just stand around when people needed their help. He couldn't.

Ash ran his hand over the pokeballs that belonged to him. Longing ran through him, and he wished that he could take all of them with him. He hated leaving any of them behind and tried as hard as he could to steadily rotate his teams through Unova and Kalos. Pikachu was the only pokemon that consistently remained with him. Even Ria had come back several times, though it worked for her because she loved the ranch too.

Not bothering to read the names, feeling out their Auras instead, Ash grabbed five pokeballs, since Pikachu's old, lightning-bolt pokeball was always with him. He turned to face the others and said, "Got who I need. How about you?" The question was directed at Tracey, since Misty already had her six pokemon with her. With an internal wince, Ash realized that all of her other pokemon had been at the Cerulean Gym, and there was no telling what happened to them. It was lucky that she transferred all his water-types back to Professor Oak before going to Kalos, or his would have been there too. He let her keep them with her to study, since she couldn't travel to catch pokemon in certain regions herself.

"I'm good to go," Tracey said with a nod. They were about to leave the room, when the screen suddenly became snowy. All three of them jumped at the sudden sound, looking around to see what was going on. The screen flickered several times before a solid, crystal-clear image came through.

There was a tall, imposing man sitting behind a desk, half of his face shrouded in shadows. "Good evening, citizens of Kanto." His voice sent shivers up Ash's spine, and the teenager was positive that he had heard it somewhere before. "Or perhaps not to good for the poor souls in Cerulean City. Such a loss of life his tragic, especially when it was highly avoidable."

"Avoidable?" Misty burst out, startling Pikachu off of her shoulder. "How is a tsunami avoidable?!" The pokemon just stared up at her sadly from his spot on the floor.

"Some of you may know me, I am Giovanni, former leader of the Viridian City Gym. Today, I do not come to you as a representative of the League, today I come as a saviour from it. For far too long, the Champions and the Elite Four have pulled the strings of every citizen's life, and it is time to take the power back from them and give it to those who can use it for the people." His hand curled into a fist.

"Progress requires sacrifice, and I have sacrificed much to be able to come to you today as a beacon of hope. You may have heard horrible things about my organization, through the manipulation of Champion Lance, Master Red and their Elite Four. I assure you, Team Rocket is none of those things. We are the hope for the future. Already, we have set into motion the actions that will free us all from the Pokemon League's manipulations."

There was sudden movement by him, and he tapped his desk, a moment later, a small, blue pokemon hopped on top of it, and Ash gasped. "Manaphy?"

"I urge all citizens to comply with the Team Rocket agents that you will find in your cities shortly. If you do so, there will be no problems and all will be well. If you choose to try and fight for the wickedness of the Pokemon League, you will be detained and punished." He stroked Manaphy's head while the pokemon stared blankly into the camera. "You may be wondering who my friend is here. This is the legendary pokemon, Manaphy, and it, along with all others, have agreed to aid Team Rocket in our quest to save you all."

"You must understand, this transition is for the better of all, and those to try to stop the oncoming era of progression will be punished without prejudice. Cerulean City will remain the example of such a thing. It broke me to have Manaphy drown the city because of one girl's selfish brutishness, but it shall be a lesson for everyone. All of your actions matter. In this case, you only have gym leader, Misty Waterflower to thank for Cerulean's destruction. She chose to side with the League, using violence to harm innocent trainees. If you are watching this, Miss. Waterflower, I hope you realize what your actions have caused."

Misty's hands shot up to her mouth and she stumbled backwards. Ash grabbed a hold of her to keep her up, and this time the tears didn't even hesitate to start. "Oh Arceus."

"The legendary pokemon have made their choice and have little patience for those who defy it. They see Team Rocket as the path to a brighter future, and I expect everyone else to fall in line with them for a smooth, peaceful transition to a better era. An era free of the manipulations of the Pokemon League." Giovanni stared directly at the camera. "Today, a new era has begun. Today, Team Rocket rises." The screen shut off.

"Misty, breathe," Ash urged her, grabbing her shoulders to turn her around so that she was facing him. He put her hands on her cheeks and said, "he's lying. You didn't do that. He's..."

"It's because of what I did to those Rocket Grunts when I saved you," Misty muttered, tears streaking down her cheeks and onto his gloved hands. "I didn't... he destroyed all of Cerulean City for that!" Ash pulled her close, hugging her tightly.

"No one would dare stop whatever he's doing," Tracey muttered, his face pale. "If one person's actions warrant the destruction of an entire city..."

"Tracey!" Ash snapped at him, and the young man winced, realizing what he said.

"I'm just repeating his words, I don't believe it! Misty, it can't be your fault. Something, this... this couldn't have been that spontaneous, I... it couldn't be," Tracey said, flailing his arms towards the screen. His brown eyes met Ash's and he asked, "Why would a legendary pokemon listen to the boss of Team Rocket?"

Ash shook his head. "I don't know." He really didn't, especially not one as sweet as Manaphy. Yet there were no devices or anything on her that might explain her being controlled.

A sudden, extremely loud series of bangs echoed through the room, coming from the hall, followed by screams. The four of them (including Pikachu) jumped and shot each other alarmed expressions before dodging behind a counter. A moment later, the door flew open, and Ash instantly went on guard. He recognized their auras from when he passed by the other room earlier, but only now did he realize how bleak that they were.

"Start grabbing the pokemon. Any of 'em. Look for stronger trainers."

"These ones here belong to Gary Oak."

"Professor Oak's grandson? Take them. Hey, this one here, Leaf Green, didn't she come in the top four in Hoenn this year?"

"Yes. Oh-ho, look at these, Ash Ketchum. That's the Kalos one. I'm grabbing these ones definitely."

Misty and Tracey tried to grab him, but with his pokemon threatened, Ash shot out from behind their hiding spot. Pikachu launched himself over the desk, cheeks sparking. The pokemon trainer

didn't say a word, but Pikachu still knew what he wanted. Static electricity surrounded the small pokemon and he threw himself at one of the men in the room, instantly paralyzing him (temporarily). The second person in the room held up his gun, but Ash was already prepared for that. He focused on the gun, creating a small barrier inside of the barrel. He didn't know if it would work or what would happen, if the gun would explode or something, but instead it made a strange sound and the man looked at it with confusion.

He looked back up at them, meeting Ash's eyes, and he just stared before trying to take off towards the door. Ash held up a hand, and watched with a bit of satisfaction as the man ran full-tilt into an invisible barrier, flying backwards and hitting the ground with a thump. The bags that they had been shoving the pokeballs in laid on the floor.

"Ash!" Misty shot out and smacked his arm. "What were you thinking?! They were armed!" He rubbed the spot that she hit a little bit harder than she meant to, and was about to argue with her when he saw just how worried she actually was.

"I couldn't let them take them." Ash looked around at Pikachu and held an arm out. The pokemon climbed up onto his shoulder and the boy stroked his fur. "You did good."

"Chaa."

Footsteps sounded from the hall, and a moment later, a frazzled Professor Oak rushed into the room. His blue eyes were wild, his hair a mess, and there was blood staining his white lab coat. The old man's eyes went wide at the scene before him and he just stared at them, dumbfounded.

"Professor, did they get...?" Ash blinked with surprise as the Champion of Kanto and Johto stopped right behind Professor Oak. "What are you... never mind. I'll be damned. You got one of them." Like Professor Oak, Lance's suit was covered in blood.

"Are you okay?" Tracey had the sense to ask, taking a few steps towards his mentor and the League Champion.

"Yes, this isn't from us," Professor Oak answered. "Are you three okay? Why are you here?"

"I just wanted some of my pokemon." It wasn't a complete lie, but after Giovanni's public claim that Cerulean was targeted because of Misty, Ash knew that going there would just cause more harm than good. Even if it wasn't the girl's fault, people would still lash out at her so going there was out of the question. "What's going on?"

"We need to get all of these pokemon out of here," Lance said. He looked into the hall. "Green! Can we use Red's storage? It's the only one not hooked up to the League Systems."

Ash was more than a bit surprised to see Leaf's mother walk into a room, looking surprisingly clean and alert. Most of the time he saw her, she was still in her pyjamas and looked like she would rather be sleeping her day away. She walked into the room, wearing a black dress, black shoes and a white jacket, her attention instantly drawn to the two men laying on the floor. Turning her head to face Lance, she said, "Yeah. I'm not sure what the limit on it is, but we'll get as many as we can. We'll carry the others if we have to."

"What about the ones in the system?"

Lance sighed and shook his head. "We can't get to them. This is a nightmare."

"What's going on?" Ash asked again, taking a step forward. "Why are you covered in blood? Why were they trying to take the pokemon?"

"Because they're a part of Team Rocket," the Champion explained bluntly, a bitter smile on his face. "And we have no idea who else is."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: CLAVUS

Arceus' Plea

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Agatha had been a part of the Elite Four for a very long time. She had seen the fall of the old way of doing things and the subsequent rise of a better way. She got to see the league work side-by-side with the rest of the government in peace. She got to see it slowly change again, becoming more secretive, more like it used to be under the guise of a new and free institute. She saw the fall of Team Rocket many years ago, after the loss of Madame Boss, the only name the old woman had ever given them.

Agatha never thought she'd see such a swift and quick take-over.

Gunshots rang out, screams and shouts echoing through the halls of the Indigo Plateau. Still, she did not run to save herself. No, instead she calmly headed to a sealed room, only stopping to look out the window as Moltres flew by, unleashing a torrent of fire down on the people below. Continuing on her way to the room, she turned on a computer, putting in half a dozen complicated passwords. The old woman found what she was looking for, and went to work.

"Gen gengar," her Pokémon said as he stared at the door.

"It's alright. I'll be done soon," she replied simply. Agatha typed wildly, using the mouse to drag and drop different things. She opened another program, waiting for it to load before hitting the 'record' button. "Lance, if you are seeing this, I am dead. I have transferred all of your Pokémon as well as the other Elites and top ranking trainers. I will not say where in case someone else accesses this. I do not know who our friends are anymore. You should know though. I do not know what will happen, but I know you can pull through once again." She stopped recording and sent the video along a secure line. Once all the transfers were done, she logged off the system and turned off the computer. "Arbok, destroy all of the computers in here."

"Bok!" The poison-type lashed out, powerful jaws destroying the one she had been using before going on a small rampage around the room.

"Bat cro cro!" Her Crobat called out to her.

"Let them come," she replied simply, holding her cane in front of her. "They may take my soul away, but they will not take these Pokémon."

"Gengar gen gengar gar." The old woman looked up briefly, understanding. Her Pokémon would not leave her. They had been together for so long, and no matter what she said or did, they would stay together. All of her Pokémon stared at her with the same determined expressions.

The door flew open and a young woman walked into the room, her blonde hair bouncing around her face. "Ah, Agatha, there you are!"

"I know you. They call you Black Tulip." The woman smirked. "If you think I plan on coming quietly with you, you're quite wrong."

"If you want to die, that's fine with me. One less thing to worry about."

"I have lived a long life. Long enough to know that you will not win." Agatha lifted her head.

"We've already won," Domino, also known as Black Tulip, answered.

"No. You lost the second you involved the legendary Pokémon," the old woman nodded her head. "Now do as you will. You may kill me, but I will drag your soul to hell on the way." Then her ghost and poison Pokémon attacked.

...

Delia jumped as the door flew open, and Leaf was on her feet, ready to fight whoever came through. Her stance faltered a bit and she stared with surprise at who she saw. "Mom? What the hell are you doing?"

"Go outside, get in the car. I already have your things packed. You as well, Gary." She walked into the room and looked at the others. "The league is extracting everyone from this house. Yes, Gary, your grandfather is there."

"Extracting? What the hell is going on?" Meyer demanded as he stood to his full height.

Leaf actually had to admit that she was impressed with the way her mother didn't seem at all phased. Meyer Liscio was a big man, and was quite intimidating when he wanted to be. His kids, so sweet and soft-spoken, must have gotten it from their mother.

"No time." She motioned towards the stairs. "Get your things. We're leaving in five minutes." She looked around at the door. "You two, get your things."

Ash and Misty came inside, both looking highly alarmed. Leaf wanted to talk to them, to ask if Misty was okay after that horrible announcement that Giovanni made, but they both just ran upstairs, not questioning her mother's orders.

"Ash?" Delia called out to her son, but he didn't answer. She looked around at Amanda and asked, "What's going on?"

"No time," the woman repeated sternly. "If we don't go now, there's a chance that everyone here could be in grave danger. Now is not the time to argue. Lance is waiting."

"Lance?" Clemont spoke up, blue eyes flashing with alarm. "The Kanto Champion? He's here?" He almost cringed back under Green's stern expression.

"Get your bags," Delia said suddenly, frowning a little bit. "We'll go."

"Mom?" Serena looked up at Grace, waiting to see if she would agree with the woman or not. Lips pressed together, her mother nodded, and Serena took off towards the basement to grab both of their bags. Clemont and Bonnie didn't even bother asking their father, they just ran up the stairs after their friend left.

"Amanda," Delia asked, her voice a bit fearful. "At least tell me, does this have to do with Cerulean? Or why they took Ash?"

"Yes, and every minute spent talking or arguing is a minute lost." She turned her eyes away. "And you know as well as I do what minutes can mean, Yellow."

Leaf looked over at Gary, raising an eyebrow and mouthing, "Yellow?" He shrugged, looking just as lost as she felt. They didn't argue with the woman as she led them out to the car, but her urgency was startling when contrasted to the quiet, peaceful streets of Pallet Town. It sounded like she was expecting the apocalypse, when in reality, there was nothing.

Still, there were black cars lined on the road, and they were ushered into one of them where Professor Oak and Tracey were waiting. They climbed into the back of the SUV, though Gary was quick to lean over to look at the other two passengers.

"Gramps! What happened to your shirt? What's going on?"

Leaf leaned forward and gasped when she saw the blood that was smeared on his shirt. She could tell it wasn't his, nor was it Tracey's, but it was still a lot. Whoever that came from, if it was only one person, probably didn't live to tell the tale of what happened.

"I suppose that's the real question we're all wondering, what's going on?" Professor Oak said, his voice low and tired. "What is this world coming to?"

Gary and Leaf exchanged uncomfortable looks, but sat back in their seats as the man in the driver's spot started the vehicle. Looking around, she watched as Clemont, Bonnie, their father and Delia were ushered into one car, though the brunette only went with them when her son nodded his head and waved to her. Ash, Misty, Serena and her mother all went into yet another one. Moments later, the entire caravan started moving.

"Where are we going?" Leaf wondered, more to herself than anything else. "And why are we the only ones going? If something's wrong, aren't they in danger too?"

"Huh," Gary looked out the tinted window, watching as they zoomed down the narrow roads, by houses with small children playing. He frowned and lowered his voice, "Maybe if there is something wrong, us being as far away from them as we can will keep them safe."

The teenage girl wasn't sure what the boy was thinking of exactly, but for a brief moment, all she could picture was the piercing red eyes that belonged to Giratina. Her stomach clenched uncomfortably. On the television, Giovanni had said that the legendary Pokémon were on his side, and they both knew very well that legendary Pokémon tended to find Ash. If Team Rocket wanted him, it was only a matter of time before they showed up. Leaf wasn't sure if that's what Gary was getting at, but if it was, she could understand.

The unsettling thing was that she was pretty sure neither Team Rocket nor the Pokémon League truly knew about Ash's entanglement with the legendary Pokémon. If that was the case, then they were being toted off for a completely different reason.

Turning around, Leaf looked back as Pallet Town faded out of view. She wasn't sure she wanted to know what was happening or why it was, but she had a sick feeling that whatever it was had just barely begun.

...

"They tried to take the Pokémon?" Serena was twisting around in her seat, looking back at Ash and Misty with wide eyes. "And they were... agents of some sort?"

"G-Men," Ash answered his friend as Pikachu nodded in agreement. "Apparently they weren't though. They were Team Rocket grunts the entire time."

"Do you think there are more like that?" The blonde cast a look over her shoulder at the woman driving the car, eyeing her suspiciously.

"Not here." Ash spoke with such certainty that it honestly surprised her a little bit. Still, she chose to trust him. Sometimes he was wrong, but he generally had pretty good instincts for who to trust or who to avoid.

Nodding her head, Serena turned her attention to Misty, who had been incredibly silent. They hadn't known each other for very long, but she already knew that the redhead was anything but shy. The blonde knew why she was so quiet, of course, but it was still a bit strange. Something small and unpleasant tugged in Serena's chest as she watched Misty lean a bit against Ash, her shoulder pressing against his. She felt a little stupid at the bit of jealousy, especially in these circumstances, but there was nothing she could do about her own feelings.

The teenager cast a quick glance at her mother, who was keeping her eyes firmly ahead of them, though she was obviously listening in. Serena wet her lips a bit and then looked around again.

"Hey, Misty?" She spoke hesitantly, drawing the older girl's attention to her. "It might not mean much coming from me, but that guy on the TV, he's just an... an ass! Don't let what he said get to you." She nodded her head, short hair bobbing with her. "It's not true."

Misty stared at her for a moment, and Serena felt like she had said something wrong or overstepped her boundaries. She opened her mouth to apologize when the redhead smiled. "Thanks. It does mean something."

The blonde closed her eyes as a smile spread across her face, a smile that quickly vanished as the car suddenly jerked. She flew into her mother, who glared at the driver. "What are you doing?"

"Sorry, change of plans and we were about to miss the road," the woman driving said.

"Change of plans?" Grace asked, reaching out and grabbing Serena's hand as her eyes narrowed.

"We're not going to the Indigo Plateau."

"The only thing down this road is Johto though," Ash said with a frown before glancing at Misty. "I'm right, right?"

"Yes," Misty shook her head in a brief moment of amusement before it was replaced with a serious frown. "He's right though."

"Yes, I know, we're going to Johto."

"What? Why?"

The woman looked into the rearview mirror briefly, dark violet eyes serious. "Because there is no more Indigo Plateau."

...

If someone were to stop Clemont and ask him what was going on, he wouldn't have the faintest idea, and that didn't really sit very well with him. He took pride in his intelligence, his ability to see how pieces were fitting together to make a larger object work, but from a kidnapping to traveling to Kanto to the destruction of a city to suddenly fleeing a seemingly peaceful town, he was hardly able to tell up from down.

His father was annoyed, his sister was scared but kept on a brave face, and he just settled on being perplexed. A quick glance at Mrs. Ketchum surprised him, because while her fists clenched onto her skirt, there was an almost resigned look on her face. "Are you okay, Mrs. Ketchum?" Clemont wasn't sure what urged him to speak up, but it startled both him and the woman he was talking to.

"Oh, I'm fine, thank you," she smiled at him, the same warm smile that Ash would always use. It faded a bit and she looked out the windshield in the front. "I just...I thought this was over years ago. After Misty died and then John and Hillary years later..."

"Misty?" Clemont was pretty sure that he saw Misty get into the other car with Ash and Serena earlier, so she definitely wasn't dead.

"Not that Misty, another one." She shook her head. "Don't mind me. A worried woman's musing."

The blond teenager highly doubted that, but decided not to push the issue. Ash or even Misty might be able to shed some light on the topic.

Instead, he looked out the window, trying to make sense of the world that was shooting by them. The bespectacled boy was positive that they were going much faster than any speed limit recommended, and it didn't seem like anyone had any intentions of slowing down. Earlier, they had quickly gone a different direction, but their driver offered no answers. He just kept going.

Finally, after what felt like hours of high-speed racing, they began to slow down, starting to go up instead. Clemont blinked with surprise, because they didn't really appear to be anywhere. There were no buildings, just a massive mountainside. "Where are we?"

"The Silver Mountain Range," Delia answered, looking out the window and pointing. "You see that, over there? That's Mt. Silver. Towards the bottom on the west side, that's where the Silver Conference is held. To the east is Kanto. Mt. Silver is split almost perfectly in two between the two regions."

"Woah," Bonnie whispered, moving so she could see better. "That's cool. I want to climb it!"

"Maybe one day, kiddo," Meyer said, ruffling his daughter's hair. "Isn't that where the Pokémon Master is said to live?"

"So the stories say."

They weren't actually driving up the mountains, but rather around twisted roads that were almost hidden within the trees and shadows. Bonnie twisted around in her seat to look back at Clemont, her eyes going wide. "Where do you think we're going?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted, and he didn't like it at all. What he did know was that the Indigo Plateau was northwest of Pallet Town, and judging from the path they took earlier, they were

probably heading farther west. That didn't really make sense to him, because that would imply that they were heading into Johto. Though he supposed Lance did have the jurisdiction in both regions.

Making sure that the driver wasn't paying attention to them (not that he should have been, considering he was driving), Clemont slipped his cellphone out of the pocket of his overalls. He quickly went to the messaging app and typed out, 'do you know what's going on'.

Serena's reply came back quicker than he expected. 'Yeah. We're going to some city in Johto.'

'Why?'

'Not really sure, but from the sounds of it, I think Indigo might have been attacked too.'

Clemont leaned back in his seat, staring at the roof of the SUV as he took a deep breath. Whatever they had gotten themselves into, it just seemed to be getting worse and worse.

...

"Ash."

The teenager wasn't quite sure when he nodded off, but at the sound of his name, his brown eyes snapped open. He winced at how bright and oddly blurry the world around him looked, rubbing at his eyes a bit. When he looked up again, it was still just as bright and blurry, like everything around him was glowing. It felt strange. That was when he realized that he was dreaming.

Standing up, he looked around, waiting for something to happen. There was a sudden rush of wind that brushed his messy hair against his face, and the boy turned around. Almost instantly, anger rushed through him. Most people would have been in awe or honoured at the fact that Arceus appeared before them, but Ash just wanted to throw something at the Pokémon.

"Why?" He demanded before Arceus could say anything. "Why did Manaphy do it? Why did Giovanni say all the legendaries are on his side? What did we do wrong?" He paused as a horrid thought welled up in him. When he spoke next, his voice came out as almost a squeak. "Was it something I did?"

"No," Arceus' voice was soft and soothing. "No, this is no fault of yours. Nor the innocent people who are already lost." The Pokémon shook his head. "Not everything is as it seems. The crisis that you face goes far beyond what any of you realize. It goes beyond your group of friends, beyond the political struggle that has been raging on in secret for many years now." His red and green eyes looked towards Ash, and the teenager felt like the Pokémon was staring into his soul. Maybe he was. "The enemy has gained allies in more places than you think. Your leagues, your politics, they mean nothing. I would not interfere with such a struggle, because that is unfortunately what people do."

"Then why are you here?"

"I once told you that your destiny was your own to choose, and it still is, but I must ask something of you. Something I never wanted to ask a Chosen One before. I need you to help me."

"Help you?" Ash's stomach twisted uncomfortably.

"The danger that approaches is greater than you can imagine now, and I can stop it, but I cannot do it alone. I need something, something that I made inaccessible to myself, should I have been guided by the wrong intentions." Arceus lowered his head. "You yourself have witnessed how I too can be blind. This time, I am not. I cannot reverse what has happened, you know as well as I that

the past cannot be changed, but I can prevent such horrid things from happening in the future with your help."

"Yes," he nodded his head quickly. "I'll help." If he could stop the legendary Pokémon from attacking, if he could stop people from dying, of course he would help. It wasn't even really a choice to him.

"It is a big task." Three very familiar, glass orbs appeared in front of Ash, hovering within arm's reach. "You recognize these, yes?"

"Yeah." He reached out, touching the pale blue sphere. "The treasures of Fire, Ice and Lightning Islands."

"They are so much more than that." Arceus moved closer and nodded at them. "Did you not wonder why they never broke? Or why the power within was revealed to only you?"

"I thought it was reacting to my Aura," he admitted, but it never really occurred to him while running from island to island, avoiding angry legendary Pokémon, a psycho trying to capture them, and nearly drowning in the process of stopping it all, why the spheres didn't shatter with everything that happened.

"They were, but they were also reacting to just you. You see, these orbs are special. I made them myself. Within them, contains the very essence of what humans have come to call Pokémon-types."

"The...essence?"

"That is the simplest way I can explain it. What they truly are cannot be comprehended by mortal beings." The orbs slowly started moving around Ash in a circle, and he jerked his arm back with surprise as others appeared along with them. "Those are only three of them."

"Why are you showing me this?" The trainer asked, looking at them all. If they were all designed to represent a type, then it didn't take a genius to realize that there were eighteen of them.

"I need you to find these for me and bring them back to the beginning."

"What?" He looked at Arceus, confusion rushing through him. "All of them? Well... where... what?"

"I told you it was a big job. Each one is protected by a legendary Pokémon. If they, a Pokémon, or any person takes them, the orbs will eventually disappear back to their homes. The legendary Pokémon can retrieve them and bring them back, but they cannot remove them. Only you can."

"Because I'm the Chosen One."

"Yes."

"Where do I even start looking?" Ash met Arceus' eyes. "Shamouti Island? That's pretty far from where I am right now."

"No. I do not know where the legendary Pokémon have hidden them, but I do know where the path to finding them begins. Go to the Ilex Forest, to Celebi's shrine, to begin the journey. The occurrences within your political system may seem like the priority at the moment over this, but this is the only answer that will save everyone."

"The only..." Ash trailed off, closing his eyes. Arceus was right, it did seem like what was happening with the Pokémon League was much more important than running after some orbs, but with the legendary Pokémon attacking, he could already see how things were much bigger than any of them realized. "Ilex Forest..." His eyes snapped open, his hand curling into a fist. "I'll do it. I'll find them. But what do you mean by bring them back to the beginning?"

"You will understand when the time comes. Thank you, Ash Ketchum."

Ash had so many more questions, but he could already feel his mind getting fuzzy as the image around him began to blur before it faded into darkness.

...

They drove and drove, and by the time they reached their destination in Blackthorn City, the sky was dark. No one was given an explanation as to what was happening or what was going to happen, they were just shown into the gym where a slightly confused Clair apologized to them for not having a place for them to sleep, but offered her living area for them to use with their sleeping bags.

Misty hadn't slept all that much, the sick feeling in her stomach still coursing through her. She hadn't been able to eat the food that was offered to her earlier, though she desperately tried to force a little bit down, if only because of the worry on Ash and Delia's faces. She might have been able to ignore everyone else, but not them.

She set her sleeping bag very close to her boyfriend's that night, half tempted to get him to unzip his so they could curl up together on that while using hers as a blanket. They had done it before. With so many people around them though, Misty stayed in her own and just stayed close. It was this proximity that woke her up as he started to twitch and move. Pikachu woke up as well, crawling out of the sleeping bag and staring at Ash with worry.

Misty pushed herself up and looked at him, watching as his face contorted and he rolled a bit. She reached out, touching his arm and shook gently. "Ash?" She jerked back a bit, startled at how quickly his eyes snapped open, Pikachu mirroring her movement. Ash Ketchum was a lot of things, but a light sleeper was not one of them. If he woke up on his own, that was one thing, but trying to wake him up when he didn't want to be was near impossible.

Ash's eyes darted around before he jerked up, breathing in and out deeply. Misty moved into a kneeling position and put her hand on his shoulder. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"I... I need a bit of air," Ash said with a sigh. He smiled at her and pet Pikachu's head, crawling out of his sleeping bag. "I'm just going to go outside for a few minutes. I'll be back. Pikachu, stay with Misty, okay?" He nodded at his Pokémon and then pressed his lips to her forehead before getting up completely and walking away.

Misty exchanged confused looks with Pikachu, and they were both quick to scramble up. The Pokémon jumped up onto her shoulder, and they moved to the door that Ash left open, peering outside. The boy didn't go far, just staring up at the sky with his back towards them.

The redhead jumped when a warm hand gently landed on her shoulder. She looked around and found Delia, who smiled at her and said, "Stay here." Misty nodded, just watching as she walked out towards her son. She didn't leave though, choosing to watch instead.

"Ash?" Delia called out softly as she approached her son. He looked over his shoulder at her and smiled a little bit before looking back up at the sky. It was completely clear and calm, like nothing

was wrong in the world. "I saw you get up. Did you have a nightmare?"

"No, I just..." Ash looked down. "Mom, I haven't been very honest with you about something. About me. And I... there's something I need to do but..." He shrugged.

"But you need to go," his mother finished, resignation in her voice.

"I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry." Delia reached up, brushing his hair out of his face. "I always knew you were special. Every mother says that, but I really did know. You've always been different, and not just because of your Aura." She took a deep breath and blinked her eyes rapidly. "If you need to go, I won't stop you. I'll be here, rooting for you every step of the way like I always do." She closed the distance between them, hugging her son tightly.

Misty had to look away as she saw tears streaking down the woman's cheeks. She hugged herself, and for a brief moment, she wondered what her own mother would have been like. She didn't really remember the woman, but from what Daisy told her, she was the affectionate type. Though she probably wouldn't have understood this.

The redhead looked up as Delia came back inside. The woman wiped her tears away before reaching out and hugging Misty. She was a bit surprised but embraced the woman back. "Be careful, sweetie." Delia let go, took a few steps back, reaching out to scratch Pikachu behind the ear briefly, and turned to walk away.

At first, Misty didn't understand what she meant, and a quick glance at Pikachu told her that he had no idea either, but then she looked at Ash's figure and understood. Walking outside, Misty slid her hand into his without saying a word, Pikachu scampering from her shoulder to his.

"Nothing I say will stop you from coming, will it?" He asked her.

"Not a thing," Misty confirmed with a nod of her head, squeezing his hand tightly. "You're going to tell me what's going on, and we're going to come up with a plan." A yawn escaped her lips and she stared up at him with an embarrassed expression. "In the morning?"

A small smile appeared on Ash's face and he nodded his head. "In the morning." He moved back towards the interior of the gym, gently pulling her along behind him. A bit of movement caught Misty's eyes, and in the dim light, she saw Leaf close her eyes quickly. There was little doubt in the redhead's mind that their friend had heard them.

That was something else that they could deal with in the morning.

...

From the moment they came to Blackthorn City, Leaf had been suspicious. It wasn't that she was an overly paranoid person, but something didn't sit right with her. If something had happened at the Indigo Plateau, Lance didn't seem all that worried about it.

The news report that they saw the next morning made her stomach drop. There was no mistaking the three legendary birds for something else as they viciously attacked Indigo Plateau in the video that none of the newscasters could apparently turn off. Rocket grunts were swarming into the building, picking off people who tried to flee.

It was a message, she knew that much. A message that absolutely no one was safe. A nail in the coffin after the attack on Cerulean City.

For so long, Leaf had been lost in her life. She became a trainer at the age of ten along with Gary, Ash and poor Joey, but she hadn't really known what to do with herself. Joey had his breakdown, Gary and Ash continued to pursue competitive battling, but she kind of just wandered, making friends with Pokémon and helping Professor Oak out from time to time. Then Gary turned to research and a small part of her was reminded that they were young, that they had time to make up their minds. She thought that she might want to do research and was very interested in poison Pokémon, but meeting Ash, Misty, Brock and Dawn in Sinnoh led her on a different path. Something inside of her was ignited after that adventure, and she finally ventured into the world of competitive battling. It was frustrating, and exhausting at times, but Leaf finally felt like she was somewhere that she belonged.

It was a selfish thing, but the knowledge that it was being ripped away from her made her want to do something rather than just get carted around.

That was why she kept an eye on Ash and Misty. The brunette knew what she heard the night before, she just needed to wait for a good moment to bring it up.

The adults left the room (she didn't count Tracey), and Leaf pounced on the moment. She whipped around, put her hands on her hips and said, "What were you talking about last night, about leaving?"

Gary, Clemont, Serena, Tracey and Bonnie all turned their attention towards Ash, looking at him with different forms of surprise and curiosity.

Ash himself seemed taken back before he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You heard that, huh?"

"Yeah. So what's up?"

He shifted uncomfortably and looked around at his friends from Kalos. "I haven't been entirely honest with you guys about something. Something kind of big."

"You never told them?" Gary interrupted before any of them could say anything. "Wait, which something are you talking about? Your Aura? Or being the Chosen One? Cause if it's something outside of those, then you really have some explaining to do."

"Thank you, Gary," he deadpanned in return.

"I'm sorry, what?" Serena asked, settling an argument before it could even start. "Aura? Chosen One? What?"

"I've heard of Aura," Clemont supplied, staring at Ash oddly. "It's an incredibly rare gift that very, very few people in the world have. They can basically manipulate an energy called Aura. The most common form of this can be found in the attack Aura Sphere, which many Pokémon can use. Are you telling us that you can do that?" He sounded almost affronted by this knowledge.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I don't tell anyone but the people who have seen it," Ash admitted, holding his hand out. A small, glowing sphere appeared above his hand.

"Woah!" Bonnie leaned in closer, reaching out to touch it. The sphere vanished and she pulled her hand back, shaking it. "Tingly. That's really cool though."

Ash smiled at her a bit and nodded. "It is. It's dangerous though. That's why I didn't say anything. It's also why I didn't say anything about... well... you guys have seen how legendary Pokémon kind of appear around us, right?" All three nodded. "Yeah that happens a lot with me, because

apparently I'm some Chosen One or at least that's what they call it now. It's... kind of... it's my job to protect them, and to protect everyone from them." He looked down and shrugged.

"Protect everyone from them?" Serena whispered, her eyes glancing towards the television that was still playing.

Ash followed her gaze and nodded his head, quickly looking back. "I had a dream last night. Well, not a dream. There's something I need to do. I need to find something. Well, more than just one thing. If I can, then I might be able to stop this." He motioned towards the television again. "He said that this was going to get worse. That people alone aren't going to be enough to stop this. I don't know if he's right, but I have to try. I have to do something."

That was something Leaf could appreciate. She nodded her head and said, "What do you have to find? Do you have any idea where we need to go?"

"The Ilex forest is the first sp-... wait... we?" The brown-eyed boy looked at her with confusion.

"Yeah, we." She nodded her head. "I heard Misty say that she was going with you last night, but you know you attract trouble like it's no one's business. So I'm coming too, and don't even think about saying no." Leaf crossed her arms in front of her. "I can't just sit around here either."

"I'm coming too," Gary piped up. "I was with you when we met 'him' the first time, so I'm coming this time too. Besides, out of everyone here, no one knows as much about ancient Pokémon and the folklore that goes with it than I do."

"So am I." Bonnie looked up at Clemont with surprise. "What? I have a lot of inventions that might help with whatever this is." He looked around towards Ash, blue eyes determined. "You told me once that what makes people strong is their friends, and I don't think I can just sit around here while you guys are out there."

"Clemont..." Ash mumbled.

"I want to come!" Bonnie said, clasping her hands into fists. "You know I can keep up."

"No," Clemont shot down quickly. "No. Not this time. You're going to stay here with dad and Serena and—."

"Not me," Serena interrupted. She had been staring at the television and looked back towards them, face set and eyes fierce. "I'm coming with you guys too."

Bonnie opened her mouth to protest, but Tracey, who had been sitting silently during the entire exchange along with Misty, suddenly spoke up, "It's okay Bonnie, I'm going to stay here too." He looked at Ash seriously. "I was just thinking, you need a way to stay in touch with what's going on here. That can be me. There's a function in the Pokédex that lets you send memos. It helps with adding information from trainers. I can send you memos back and it's not nearly as traceable as emails or anything. I'll just set it up so they come to me and not Professor Oak."

"You can do that?" Misty asked him, her face scrunching with confusion.

"Technically it's illegal to make them come to me," Tracey admitted with a shrug. "I don't mind. Don't forget, I was on Shamouti with you guys. I remember how important this type of thing can be." He looked at Bonnie. "You can help me. They might say things in front of you that they won't in front of me."

"So, we'll be like spies?"

"Exactly!"

Bonnie slowly nodded her head and turned back to her brother. She grabbed his hands and shook them fiercely. "You gotta promise you'll come back though, okay? That means you can't lag behind everyone else. You'll just have to suck it up, okay? Even if it's running."

"I promise," Clemont assured his sister. "I'll have Ash and Serena and everyone else. You be safe and listen to Tracey."

Bonnie nodded her head resolutely. "When are you guys going?"

They all looked around at Ash, who frowned in response. "Clemont, Serena, your parents might try to stop us. Same with your mom, Leaf, and Professor Oak too. Plus I'm not sure Lance really wants us out of his sight. So we'll have to sneak out when they won't notice us and just go."

"We'll pack up now," Gary said, hands on his hips. "Get everything ready but keep it hidden. There will be more people on lookout tonight, but we should go when it's dark. Less chance of them tracking us."

"Ria and I can make sure that we don't run into anyone," Ash assured him.

"Then we'll go tonight," Leaf said with a firm nod of her head. She wasn't sure exactly what they were supposed to be doing, but it was better than sitting around and watching the world fall apart.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

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Into The Woods

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Ria was the type of Lucario that people generally scoffed at, or at least doubted. She was smaller than the average Lucario, but she was a powerful thing thanks to her ability to use Aura. Her small size gave her a stealth and speed boost that she eagerly took advantage of, hiding in the shadows and waiting for the guard to walk away. She bounded ahead, motioning for the others to follow her. Clemont, Serena, Misty, Gary and Leaf ran one by one into the tree line with Ash bringing up the rear.

To Serena and Clemont, some of the things they wrote off as Ash's odd quirks suddenly made a little more sense. He would always either put himself in front of, or behind the group when traveling, and now they both knew that it was so he could protect them if he needed to.

Their escape went surprisingly well. No one even glanced twice at their packed bags earlier, as their timing coincided with Clair mentioning that they might be moving to a more comfortable place soon. No one suspected anything about them all sitting together and talking when they were really plotting their escape, and no one saw them as they slipped into the forest and vanished into the night.

They continued moving steadily, not exactly running since they didn't want to attract any attention, but walking faster than normal. Ash moved ahead of them, walking up to Ria and petting the top of her head. They all agreed earlier that they wouldn't talk when they first left, that they would just walk and get as far away as they could as quickly as they could. They'd find some kind of landmark and check the map after that. They had no cellphones on them, only Clemont's surplus of homemade devices as well as a couple of Pokédex.

"Less things they can track," Leaf had said with a nod of her head when she told them to leave the phones and everything else behind. "I'd say leave everything here but we need at least one Pokédex for this to work." She was right, not to mention the fact that if they needed to use their bank accounts in case of an emergency, they needed the Pokédex for that as well. Of course, somehow, Delia managed to slip Ash some money, but none of them dared question how the woman got so much cash so quickly.

It was a little eerie, walking through the dark forest without saying a word. The only sounds were the soft thuds of their footsteps, the occasional crunch of a twig, the rustling of leaves and bushes, and their own breathing.

Ash suddenly came to a stop, startling them a little bit. He took a few steps back and muttered, "There's something up there."

"An Ursaring," Ria added, causing almost everyone to jump and stare at her in shock.

"She can talk?" Serena squeaked, trying to keep her voice down.

"Telepathy," Ash answered quietly. "She's been able to do that since she was young. And yeah, before you ask, we can talk in our minds too."

"With all your Pokémon?" Clemont wondered.

"No, just Ria. The others though, it's a feeling-thing. They get the gist of what I want them to do. Takes a while to build that type of bond though." Confirming where Clemont's thoughts were going, the brown-eyed boy added, "It's how they know what to do without me actually saying anything to them. I'm communicating with them, but not out loud unless it's really specific."

"That...answers a lot," the blond boy acknowledged. It was still mind-boggling, but he was just going to roll with it.

"Where's the Ursaring?" Leaf asked them, shifting up closer to the front of the group. "And is it alone or with some Teddiursa?"

"It's alone, and that way," Ash pointed to the left. "Guess we're going the other way?"

She nodded and they all moved steadily around the area. Every once in a while, Ash and Ria would glance at something quickly, or Pikachu's ears would perk up, but no one said or did anything so they just assumed that it was a Pokémon passing them by.

Clemont was used to walking long distances at this point in time, but it was always a little bit taxing on him. He just wasn't the type with apparent limitless stamina like Ash or even Bonnie. Her being safe gave him a little peace of mind. He wasn't going to complain, he wasn't going to be the weak link, but the blond was still relieved when they came to a stop.

"Will that work as a landmark?" Ash asked, pointing up at the nearby mountain. It was closer, jutting out farther than the others.

"It's pretty distinct," Gary agreed, reaching out and pulling out the map that he brought with him. Kneeling on the ground, he folded it out, making it as flat as possible. Clemont pressed a couple of buttons on his backpack and something came out, shining a light over the map without casting any shadows. The brunet looked a bit surprised by this but quickly turned to the map again.

"Alright. So here's Blackthorn, and we left this way," Gary ran his fingers along the paper. "We walked for an hour and based on the geography, we're about...here." He picked out the mountain on the map, since it was pretty recognizable. "Close to Route 45 but not exact. You said we need to go to the Ilex Forest, right?" Ash nodded his head. "Okay, so the quickest route would be through the Dark Cave. One of the entrances will take us just by Violet City."

"The only problem is that there are only three entrances in total to that cave system," Leaf pointed out, leaning over Gary's shoulder, her gloved hand pointing to three different spots. "If anyone's going to be looking for us, that probably will be one of the first places that they check. They'll

know we didn't go north to the Ice Path. We don't have the resources for that right now."

Gary narrowed his eyes at the map, pressing his lips together as his brow furrowed. Slowly, he nodded his head. "You're probably right. We're better off sticking to the forest and cutting diagonally. It might take a little longer, but we're less likely to get caught."

"Some of us could go into Violet City when we get down there," Misty said, pointing towards the city in question. "Get some more supplies."

"I will," Leaf volunteered. "Gary, you're well-known as Professor Oak's grandson. Ash, your face has been on the news a couple times. Adding in Pikachu makes it pretty obvious who you are. Misty, I don't think I need to say anything." She looked around at the two from Kalos. "You guys could come though. No one's going to question you around here." The two blonds exchanged looks before nodding in agreement.

"From there, we can go around the Ruins of Alph," Gary pointed, his finger trailing diagonally across the page again. "We'll come in from the northeast and head straight into the Ilex Forest."

"How long is this going to take?" Ash asked, unable to hide the worry in his voice. "It took us nearly a year to get around all of Johto." Pikachu's ears lowered at the memory. It was true, they would purposely take longer, spending days tracking Pokémon or getting lost with Team Rocket on the trail and getting side tracked, but Johto was a massive region.

"As long as you don't have the map, not a year," Misty quipped, a slightly playful tone to her voice. Ash rolled his eyes at her and shook his head, though there was a small smile on his face. He couldn't be truly annoyed because it was good to hear her talk like that.

"A few days if we walk steady and there are no interruptions. We'll be able to go faster once we're out of the mountain region." Gary folded up the map and stood up again. "At least we don't have to do something ridiculous like climb Mt. Silver in the middle of winter or something." He completely ignored the fact that Mt. Silver was entirely blocked off from most people and there'd be absolutely no reason to attempt to climb up it. "I'd like to put some more space between us and Blackthorn though."

"Who made you boss?" Leaf quipped as she threw her pack onto her back. "I don't remember this conversation."

"Who else is going to be? They don't know the region," he nodded to Serena and Clemont, "Misty's a no, Ash can get lost in a straight hallway, and you're you."

"Excuse me?" Leaf put her hand on her hip, and Misty crossed her arms in front of her, raising an eyebrow. "Misty's a no and I'm me?" She took a step towards him, her dusty brown eyes narrowing dangerously. "What exactly is that supposed to mean? Cause it sounds awfully sexist to me."

Ash shook his head, Pikachu watched on with confusion, Clemont took a step back away from both of the glaring girls, and Serena suddenly looked just as affronted, even though Gary's reason for why she and Clemont couldn't lead the group was a legitimate claim.

"Car lu cario," Ria spoke up, looking towards Ash and choosing not to talk so everyone could understand her. Using her telepathy actually took quite a bit of focus and energy, and she tended to do it only when she needed to.

Ash nodded his head, understanding her. "There's a group of Pokémon heading this way. We should go. Ria will lead the way, and Gary's the map-boy."

"Map-boy?"

"Well, you do know where we're going," the raven-haired teenager replied dryly. "You'll have to lead the way when we get closer to the city."

"Ria is a really distinct Lucario," Clemont agreed. "With her height and her mega stone, anyone looking for us would recognize her." Ria reached up at the mention of the stone, her paw pressing against the glittery ribbon that was around her ear, the stone attached to it.

"Lu lucario," Ria toned in, reminding them all that they needed to go. Not only were there Pokémon heading their way, but they were still much too close to Blackthorn for comfort. They needed to put more distance between themselves and the city before they could even think of resting. All three of the girls still seemed rather put off as they started walking again.

"Hey," Ash put a hand on Misty's back and one on Leaf's equally tense shoulder, Pikachu crawling from his shoulder over onto Misty's. "Ignore him. Gary's just being Gary. We all know you could both take him."

A small laugh escaped Leaf's lips and she relaxed a bit, smiling at him. "Sorry. I just...I wish it was just Gary being a jerk. A lot of male trainers have that attitude though." At his perplexed expression, she shook her head. "That girls aren't as strong or can't be leaders. That they're worth less than the guys."

Ash blinked, looking at her, then at Misty, then at Serena and back again. "That's...a real thing? Why would anyone—? That's...stupid." He sounded so sincerely baffled by the thought that anyone could think a trainer's strength was defined by their gender or sex.

"Because the world has a severe lack of people like you, despite desperately needing it." With that, Leaf started walking a little bit faster, getting ahead of them and walking close to Ria and Gary.

"Pi pika pika chu pikachupi," Pikachu nuzzled his cheek against Misty's.

The redhead actually didn't know what he was saying, but she got the gist of it. "Thank you, Pikachu."

Ash shook his head a bit, trying to focus on something that didn't confuse him to no end. He looked towards his friends from Kalos and smiled, "You guys going to be okay with walking for a few hours straight?"

"You know we are, we've done it before," Serena assured him. "But if we happen to lag behind slightly, don't worry."

"Yeah, well if you get tired, just tell us, okay? It's not going to slow us down."

"Does your Aura let you read minds or something?" Clemont asked him.

"Nah. No mind reading," he laughed. "I just know you guys."

It was true, Ash did know them. It was just a little easy for both of them to forget, since it was obvious that Ash knew all of these other people better thanks to knowing them for so long.

Clemont smiled and Serena laughed a little bit, nodding her head. "We'll let you know if we need to stop."

He smiled back broadly and nodded in return, hiking his bag farther up onto his back and holding

out his arm to Pikachu, who jumped back over even as they walked into the night.

...

Delia winced as the lights suddenly flashed on. She squeezed her eyes shut until the burning from the transition of darkness to light faded away, and she sat up, looking around to meet a pair of worried green eyes and angry steel-blue ones.

Lance took a step forward so that he was farther into the room than Green was, and spoke in a low voice. "They're gone."

"Who?"

"Your son. Most of his friends. Only Professor Oak's assistant and the little girl are left."

Delia twisted her legs around so that they were over the side of the bed that she had been given. The one opposite of her that happened to belong to Green hadn't even been slept in. A tiny bit of pride rushed through the woman at the thought that the kids managed to sneak away even with all of these people up and about.

When she responded, there was genuine surprise on her face. "They all left?" Her surprise stemmed from the fact that, while she knew Ash was going somewhere, and that Misty would probably going, she hadn't really expected anyone else to vanish with them. She couldn't help but feel a little wave of pride.

"Ash, Misty, Gary, Clemont, Serena," Amanda's green eyes narrowed, "Leaf. All of them are gone. Their phones are here and we haven't been able to track anyone's Pokédex, if they even have them."

"Oh." The woman knew that she should have been acting more surprised, shocked or horrified over the whole situation to cover the fact that she knew something. She also knew that there was really no point since both of the other adults in the room probably figured out that she knew something already.

"You knew they were going," Lance said bluntly, confirming the woman's thoughts.

"Yes," Delia answered evenly, not the least bit concerned. "Well, I didn't know they were all going. I knew Ash was, and that Misty probably would, but that was it. And before you ask, they didn't tell me where they were going or why. Just that they needed to."

"And you didn't think to stop them?" Amanda took a step towards her. "Don't you realize what's going on? How much danger they could be in?"

"Don't you dare make it seem like I'm the bad mother here, Green," Delia snapped angrily, locks of her hair falling into her eyes. She was a tall woman, much taller than Amanda Green and able to look Lance Grayson in the eyes without a problem. She squared her shoulders and fixed them both with a stern expression. "I am going to be worried sick about all of them. I practically raised Gary and your daughter myself while you were wallowing in self-pity over what Leaf's father did to Gary's parents and aunt. Misty is like a daughter to me too. She'll probably be my daughter-in-law someday. Serena and Clemont I don't know that well, but of course I'll worry for them too. Don't you ever make it seem like I won't."

The other woman clearly wasn't expecting a verbal onslaught from the normally quirky, happy woman, and actually took a step back. A grim smile slowly appeared on her face. "Well hi, Yellow. I thought you were long gone."

Lance stepped between the two women before Delia could go off again. "It was stupid to let them go. We need them here. Team Rocket targeted your son and he was the only one to escape them. Out of hundreds of trainers."

"You've probably been watching him for a long time, haven't you?" Delia asked the Champion. "And you still don't understand him. I know my son. Ash wouldn't have been able to stay while people are being hurt. It drives me crazy with worry, but he helps people. He always has. My son is almost all grown up, and I want to be a part of his future, so I won't stand in his way." She ran her fingers through her loose hair, soft expression suddenly hardening. "It's probably for the best that he's gone anyway."

"Why's that?" Lance asked her warily.

Bright brown eyes met steel-blue ones, and without any hesitation, Delia said, "So you can't use him too."

...

Misty woke with a start. Her heart was beating wildly, her chest heaving from her heavy breathing. She sat up slowly, wiping the tears away from her eyes before they could fall.

"You okay there?" Gary's question startled her, causing her to jump and look around until her eyes landed on him, her hand resting over her heart.

"Mew, don't do that," she hissed, keeping her voice low as she took in the sight of the other boy. He was sitting rigid on an oddly shaped rock, trying to keep himself awake by staying as uncomfortable as possible. They had decided to get a few hours of sleep, hiding within the thick forest without a campfire or anything to give them away, everyone taking an hour to stand guard. Since Gary was up, that meant that there was only Serena left so it was close to when they would be on the road again.

"Sorry," he shrugged and then narrowed his viridian eyes at her. "But seriously, are you okay? You sound like you're about to have a heart attack or something."

"I'm fine," Misty insisted, crossing her arms in front of her.

"Sounded like a bad dream," the brunet completely ignored her. "You said your sisters' names."

Misty's face fell and she looked away from him, shrugging her slim shoulders. "I...I know what drowning victims look like. I keep seeing them like that."

Gary, surprised that she admitted anything to him at all, just stared at her for a moment, biting his lip before nodding his head to himself. "Your gym was on pretty high ground." Misty looked up at him, a bit startled. "If anyone got warning to get away, it was them." He fidgeted a bit, running a hand through his spiky hair. "You know, that's what I meant earlier. You not being able to lead had nothing to do with you being a girl, it had everything to do with part of your mind being back in Cerulean." He held his hands up. "Completely understandable, I'm not judging."

"I'm here," she replied quickly, her voice raising a bit.

Gary snorted lightly and shook his head. He regarded her briefly and nodded to Ash. "For him." Misty glanced over at Ash, who was sleeping a couple feet away from her. "Don't even try to deny it. If it was anyone else who wanted, needed, to go on this journey, you wouldn't be here."

Misty couldn't look back at Gary, she bit her lips as she tried to keep her eyes from watering.

Maybe he was right. Maybe her reasons for coming were more selfish than she let on. The redhead wasn't entirely sure herself. The only thing she was sure of was that, as far as she knew, all three of her sisters and her unborn niece or nephew were gone.

She watched Ash's chest rise up and down as he laid on top of his sleeping bag. The air was warm and they all slept the same way, in case they needed to get up and go as quickly as possible. Misty didn't really like sleeping like that, but she could actually see him breathing, and it was a small reminder that when her nightmares turned from her sisters back into not being able to reach him in time when Team Rocket took them, that at least he was still there.

The teenager had already lost the rest of her biological family, she didn't want to lose Ash too, even if it meant chasing after him on some ridiculous adventure.

"Get some sleep," Gary startled her again, and when she glared at him, he smiled apologetically. "I'm going to wake Serena up soon, so you've got some time."

"You're actually going to get her up? Not try to be the manly man and take her shift for her?"

"She's a lot quieter than you and Leaf, but I get the feeling I still don't want to piss her off. Now go to sleep."

A very small smile appeared on Misty's face. She was about to lay back down, but froze for a moment before moving off of her sleeping bag and shifting it until it overlapped with Ash's blue one. She then laid down, her back pressed against the boy's chest, and grabbed his arm, lifting it over her so that it was around her waist and she snuggled closer, not the least bit embarrassed that Gary was probably watching her the entire time.

Ash's eyes opened briefly and he made a strange sound that didn't really mean anything. Not really awake, he snuggled closer, his forehead resting against her hair as he instantly fell asleep again.

Pikachu perked up and looked at them, sniffing the air. He quickly scurried in front of Misty, curling into a ball against her stomach.

Gary couldn't help but watch them. He wasn't trying to be strange and stare, but in a way, their interactions fascinated him. He was genuinely surprised by the fact that Misty seemed to be able to fall asleep fairly quickly, despite the nightmares that she just woke up from.

"Don't look so jealous."

The boy looked over towards Leaf, who was propping herself up on her forearms and staring at him with amusement. "Didn't realize you were awake."

She shrugged and looked towards their shared childhood friend. "Someone might take your jealousy the wrong way."

"This again?" Gary rolled his green eyes, huffing in annoyance. "I'm not jealous. More...confused than anything else."

"About what?" The girl's amusement instantly faded. "Because Ash Ketchum 'of all people' has a girlfriend?"

The brunet didn't like her confrontational tone of voice, but decided not to snap at her. There was no need to wake everyone else up with an argument. "It's not like they're together much, and he's...you know...he's Ash."

"Exactly." Leaf rolled over so that she wasn't looking at him anymore, her back against her sleeping bag, hands behind her head as she stared up at the sky. "That's why. He's just Ash, and that means something a lot different to her." A frown passed around her features. "He has such a big heart, and she was probably the first friend that really saw it. It sure as hell wasn't us."

"I don't think—."

"Don't try to argue with me on this one, Gary Oak," she sounded almost tired as she spoke. "You were a complete asshole because you didn't want to hurt alone, and I was a coward who gave up because I didn't want to be teased." A sigh escaped her lips. "And we were always the proud ones. The daughter of Green and the son of Blue, two of three trainers who originally brought down Team Rocket. Ash was the odd one out, but only because we made it that way."

"Is that why you're here?"

"I'm here because no one, no matter what legends say, can save the world alone, and I'm not going to be afraid this time." Leaf tilted her head back so that she could see him, though he appeared upside down to her. "What about you? Why are you here?"

"I have my reasons," Gary replied gruffly, crossing his arms in front of him. "Go back to sleep." He stood up, stretching out a bit, a couple of pops coming from his joints as he moved over towards Serena. He just wanted to get a little bit of sleep too, though the young researcher doubted that he would. He already knew that Leaf's question would bother him to no end, because the truth was, he had no idea why he was there.

...

"The number you have dialled is not available. Please hang up and try again later."

With a groan of frustration, the phone was slammed into the receiver, resulting in a rather ugly glance from the Nurse Joy that was working behind the desk of the Pokémon Center. For once, the young man who slammed the phone down didn't care about what the woman thought.

Leaning back in his chair, Brock Slate sighed and looked up at the fluorescent lights above him. He had been trying all day to get through to his family in Pewter City to no avail. Then he tried Tracey, and even the Ketchums, but nothing in Kanto seemed to be connecting. Cerulean City, he could understand, but the rest confounded him a bit. Sure, most of Kanto got their power from the Power Plant by Lavender Town, but there had been no reports of the tsunami reaching that.

Brock grabbed his bag, stood up and straightened out his orange, button-up shirt. He tossed the pack onto his back and left the Pokémon Center without a single word to Nurse Joy.

Despite the tragedy in Cerulean, Goldenrod City was still bustling with activity. It made him feel a little bit numb. Everything that had happened in the past week did. He actually managed to tune in on the Kalos League Finale, and was instantly alarmed that Ash was gone. Then on the same channel newscasters talked about him being kidnapped and later found by the Pokémon League with the kidnappers unknown.

He did get to talk to Ash briefly the day before, and the young man was more than a little relieved that his friend was okay, especially after learning that Delia and Misty, not to mention his really young Kalanese friend, Bonnie, had been kidnapped along with him. Brock wanted to go see them, but he was in Goldenrod City for a convention about advances in Pokémon Medicine and Health, so he made plans to visit after the fact. Then the news about Cerulean City hit, and the only comfort he could find was the fact that he knew Misty hadn't been there. It was only a small

comfort, but Brock held onto it tightly.

Due to the tragedy, the rest of the convention had been called off, and the future doctor desperately tried to get a hold of his family and friends to alert them to the fact that he was coming home earlier and would be stopping in Pallet Town, but he couldn't reach anyone.

Brock managed to avoid most of the sidewalk traffic, getting to the train station fairly quickly. He walked inside and looked up at the times to check if he missed the earliest train back to Kanto. The young man frowned when he realized that every single one of them was listed as cancelled.

"They don't know when the trains are going to start running again."

Brock jumped, startled by the familiar voice. He looked around and down, staring with surprise at first before he laughed. "Max! What are you doing here?"

The 10-year-old Hoenn native smiled, shrugging his shoulders. "I travelled around Hoenn and Kanto with you guys when I was younger, so I decided to start somewhere else first. I've been traveling around Johto since I left home. What are you doing here? Didn't think I'd see anyone I knew!"

"You're telling me. I was here at a convention that was cancelled. I wanted to go home, but I can't even call out." Snapping out of the surprise at the coincidence in finding his young friend, Brock nodded behind him, towards an unoccupied bench. Max followed him and the two sat down.

"Hey, did you try Mrs. Ketchum's emergency cellphone?" Max asked, blinking his big brown eyes up at the young man. "Mom and dad got it from her for me while I was here, just in case. She IS a lot closer. It could be the landlines messing up."

"Huh, I never thought of that." Brock looked around for a phone, frowning a bit when he saw that they were all occupied. "Guess we'll check later. Where were you trying to go anyway?"

"I was trying to get to Pallet Town," Max admitted. "After the whole ordeal with Cerulean, my mom and dad thought it'd be better if I just go somewhere safe for a little while."

"I'm pretty sure you're safe from that tsunami way over here in Goldenrod." Brock could be overprotective of his siblings, especially since they were all growing up so quickly, but even that was a little much for him.

"No that's not...you didn't hear, did you?" Max's eyes went wide and he leaned forward. "That wasn't a normal tsunami. It was created by Team Rocket, and they targeted Cerulean City because of Misty and something she did. The boss of Team Rocket said it right on the television!"

"What?" Brock was too incredulous to really say anything else to that. How had he missed that of all things?

"Yeah. I mean, I figured that Misty was okay because of that, but still, they actually destroyed a city!"

"Wait, back up," the elder of the two held up a hand and frowned. "How does Team Rocket destroy a city with a tsunami? A weapon, I get, but a natural disaster?"

"It wasn't natural," the young boy's face shifted into a sad one as he looked towards the floor, scuffing his shoes against the linoleum tile. "It was created by Manaphy for Team Rocket."

"Mana—what? She wouldn't."

"She was on the television with him." Max shook his head sadly. "I haven't been able to get a hold of May. You know, to see if she's okay. She's somewhere in Hoenn with Drew, Solidad and Harley but I don't know where." He sighed sadly, pulling his legs up so that they were pressed against his chest, and in that moment, he looked more like the 7-year-old that Brock remembered. The young boy perked up a bit. "Hey, a phone's free, we should try to get a hold of Mrs. Ketchum."

Brock was quick to get up, going over before someone else could jump on it. His hands were shaking slightly, his whole body numb with disbelief. A legendary Pokémon being involved suddenly made things a whole lot different in Brock's eyes. Suddenly, Ash being kidnapped wasn't a coincidence in his mind. Instead, just knowing how often his friend got swept into ridiculous adventures involving legendary Pokémon, it suddenly felt like the beginning of something bigger.

Chapter End Notes

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Two Steps Back

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Tracey knew that they would question him about Ash and the others' whereabouts. Bonnie was only eight-years-old, so her father needed to give permission and be present for anyone to question her. He was an adult and there was no such barrier to stop anyone from ripping into him.

He faced down angry Pokémon and people before, he even lived through an event that could have led to the end of the world. Still, having the Champion of Kanto and Johto pace back and forth in front of him was still nerve-wracking. The man wasn't particularly tall, and his dark pink hair and cape that he wore was anything but intimidating. He appeared so much younger than he was, something most people commented on. Still, there was something being his steel-grey eyes that made Tracey shiver.

"Your name is Tracey Sketchit. 21, born on Tangelo Island on October 5th to Mark and Anna Sketchit." It wasn't a question, and the young man knew that, but he still nodded his head in agreement. "You've been Professor Oak's assistant for years now, correct?"
"That's right. About five years."

"I can see from the files on you that you passed all the security clearance tests well enough. That's good." He looked up from the files and stared at Tracey. "So my first question to you is simple enough. Why would you let a group of teenagers leave League protection when two of them have already been kidnapped once?" His tone wasn't mean in any way, more curious than anything else.

"I wouldn't have been able to stop Ash from going if I wanted to," Tracey shrugged his shoulders. It surprised even himself how casually he answered. "I don't know where they're going or why they're going, just that he felt like he needed to go and everyone else wanted to go with him." None of them had discussed exactly where the group was going. This was so Tracey and Bonnie could answer the questions with honesty.

"If you had to guess, where would he go?"

The Pokémon Watcher thought about that for a moment. Ash would go where he needed to, go to the place where he could help the most people. He reiterated his thought to the Champion.

Lance's lips rose into a small smile. "That doesn't surprise me. It's one of the reasons we've been watching Mr. Ketchum for so long." He tapped his fingers against the desk as he leaned back into his seat. "We have an approximate time that they left, and the resources to look in all directions for them. Give me a reason why I shouldn't."

Whatever Tracey had been expecting, it wasn't that. His brown eyes looked up for a moment, studying the Champion. "Because that would be a waste of resources and time when there are other things to do. What about the Indigo Plateau? What about Cerulean City?" He felt like his throat tighten a bit at the thought of a certain blonde young woman who had been there during the catastrophe. "How did this even happen?"

"There is a lot you don't know or understand, Mr. Sketchit," the man said with a shake of his head. "You do raise a good point about resources and time."

The silence that followed his statement was almost unbearable. Tracey didn't know if it was a tactic to make him blurt something out, but sitting under the scrutinizing gaze of a Pokémon Master was making him uncomfortable. Finally, he broke the silence. "Do you have any more questions for me?"

"Just one." Lance leaned forward a bit, eyes narrowing. "Do you think that whatever they're doing will hinder us in any way?"

"I don't know what you're doing, but I don't see how it would."

Lance looked up and nodded his head. "You're free to go. Send Bonnie and Meyer in on your way out."

Tracey hesitated a bit, surprised that those simple questions were the only things that Lance was asking him. When it didn't seem like the man was going to spring any surprise questions at the last second, the Pokémon Watcher made his way out of the room. He glanced over at Meyer and Bonnie, who were waiting outside of the room. Lance was using Clair's office at her gym as his own for the moment, and that included the row of chairs that were outside. In a way, it reminded Tracey of the school he went to before he left home, and how there was the same setup outside of the principal's office.

"He wants to see you guys now," the green-haired man nodded towards the door. Meyer frowned and nodded his head. A smile lifted up on his lips when Bonnie jumped up, holding Dedenne and strolling into the office with her head held high. When the door closed, Tracey leaned back and sighed.

"Are you alright?" He jumped a bit at Delia's voice. She was standing there, Leaf and Serena's mothers standing not far behind her, both appearing unhappy.

"Yeah, he didn't...he didn't really ask me much," Tracey admitted with a shrug. "It's kind of weird."

The three women exchanged glances. Grace crossed her arms in front of her, Green put her hands on her hips, and Delia sighed. "Tracey, something else happened this morning. It was on the news before it blacked out."

He felt his face pale. "What?"

"Team Rocket took over all major ports and points of entry into Kanto," Amanda Green said bluntly, taking a step towards him. "Tell me, was my daughter heading to Kanto?" Unlike Delia's calm voice, there was something darker behind this woman's.

"I really don't know."

"Someone will still go after them though, right?" Grace asked, sounding just as alarmed as Tracey felt. She wasn't told what was happening either. "Serena—."

"No," Leaf's mother shook her head. "No one's going to waste time that way. Unless they walk right into a train station or something like that, and stay under the radar, they'll be on their own."

...

It was late in the morning, long after she had to talk to Lance, and Bonnie found that she was bored. There were only so many games that she and Dedenne could come up with while trapped inside of something called The Dragon's Den. It was a strange, old building hidden inside of a cave that Lance had insisted they move into for some reason. She wasn't going to question it.

"Tini?"

Bonnie perked up at the small sound and looked around. A coo escaped her lips and she knelt on the floor. "Wow, a Dratini! You're so cute!" She held out an arm towards it. "Come here!"

The small Dratini tilted her head, looking at the little girl curiously. She moved forward, nuzzling her face into Bonnie's warm hand. The girl laughed, picking up the Pokémon and squeezing it a little tighter than she meant to.

"Tini tini!"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Bonnie let go, putting the dragon-type back onto the floor. "My name's Bonnie, and this is Dedenne. It's nice to meet you, Dratini!"

Dratini eyed Dedenne warily, and the blonde realized that it was most likely because she was a fairy-type. She opened her mouth to speak, but all three of them jumped when a tune rang out from the corner of the room where they piled their bags earlier. The Dratini slithered closer, moving in and around the bags until it came back out, proudly dropping a phone on the ground.

"Denne?" Dedenne asked the other Pokémon, who cooed back.

"Huh, I didn't think we were allowed to have phones," Bonnie noted before pressing the answer button and putting the phone up to her ear. "Hello?"

"Uh...hi?" A man's voice said. "Can I speak to Delia Ketchum?"

"Oh!" Bonnie's eyes went wide. "This is Mrs. Ketchum's phone! Huh, we're not supposed to keep them. Wonder why she did? Oh! My name's Bonnie, who are you?"

"Bonnie? That sounds familiar. My name's Brock and—."

"You're Ash's friend!" She sat on the ground, crossing her legs in front of her as Dedenne and the Dratini looked up at her curiously. "He told me all about you!"

"That's right, Ash mentioned having a friend with the name Bonnie. Is he there? Or his mother?"

"Ash isn't here. He left a while ago. Mrs. Ketchum is here, but I can't get the phone to her. She's talking to other people like Professor Oak, Gym Leader Clair and the Champion and my dad and Tracey, people like that."

"The Champ..." Brock trailed off. "Bonnie, this is important. I'm here with my friend Max, he travelled with Ash too. Can you tell me where you are?"

At this, she hesitated, remembering back to when Clemont was gone and she was with only Ash and Serena for a while. Bonnie managed to convince the older boy that she should stay up late with him to watch an action movie. Serena was asleep at the time. One thing that she remembered was people listening to other people on the phones and she thought it was pretty creepy. She didn't know if Team Rocket was listening or not.

Still, these were Ash's friends. "We're in Blackthorn City."

"Blackthorn, why...no, never mind. Are you guys going to be there for a while?"

"I think so?"

"Alright. Max and I are going to head up that way. You can tell Mrs. Ketchum or Tracey, but it might be best to keep this to yourself, alright?" Brock's words sounded kind but left little room for argument.

Dedenne and the Dratini both perked up and looked towards the door. Bonnie lowered her voice and said, "Alright. I'm going to hang up now because someone's coming. Bye." She didn't wait for Brock to say anything else, snapping the phone shut. "Dratini, can you put this back where you found it?"

"Tini!" Dratini was happy to help, grabbing the phone and going back into the pile of bags. Bonnie looked around just as the door opened and her father walked in.

"What are you up to?" he asked her with a grin.

"I was just—." Bonnie cut herself off as the Dratini popped out of the bags again.

"Ah, just playing with one of the little guys that live around here?" He knelt down to pet the Pokémon and sighed. "That's a good girl. Keeping yourself busy."

Bonnie frowned a bit and said, "Big brother will be okay, you know. I'm sure of it!"

"I hope so, Bonnie. I really hope so."

...

"I think I'm going to die," Clemont groaned to Serena. It was only moments before someone else (it didn't matter who, to him) decided that it was time to take a break. He was quick to flop to the ground, pulling off his glasses to wipe them off. He then used his sleeve to wipe the sweat that trickled down his forehead.

"Oh thank Mew," Serena muttered as she sat down beside him. Though she didn't get winded as easily as Clemont, climbing up steep hills wasn't very fun for her either. Especially not when the midday sun glared down on them with no breeze to speak of. She wasn't used to the humidity that plagued Kanto in the summer, still used to the climate in Kalos.

The blonde girl rubbed her arms, wincing a bit as her hand came into contact with the warm skin on her shoulders. She had long since shed the shirt that she wore over her black tank-top to cool herself off. That effort led to burned skin.

Leaf sat down not far from them, pulling her white gloves off of her hands and dropping them beside her. The vest that she wore followed, and she started digging through her bag. Finding a scrunchie, she was quick to tug her hair up into a quick ponytail. "Times like this are when I wish I still wore hats."

"Yeah, you used to have that loser-ish fisherman's hat, right?" Gary's teasing words didn't even sound all that teasing as he stuffed his purple jacket into his bag. He just sounded tired.

"I am going to kick you off this hill." Leaf made no movement to get up.

Ash dropped his bag to the ground beside Misty, who looked up at him. She watched with a raised eyebrow as he walked forward across the grassy plateau that they were resting on. The only way to get where they wanted to go required scaling up and then right back down a massive hill that seemed more like a mountain. A mountain without any of the steep, rocky ledges and drops. The black-haired boy narrowed his eyes a bit and asked, "What's that, over there?"

"Hmm?" Leaf tilted her head back so that she was staring in the same direction he was, albeit, upside down. "I think that's the monorail track. They travel alongside the roads, so at least we'll know where not to go."

"Unless you want to hijack a car," Gary offered.

"Steal a car?" Serena asked him, her cerulean blue eyes going wide at the thought.

"If it stays this hot, I think we might have to." He shrugged his shoulders.

Ash hummed a bit in disapproval and was about to keep walking, but Misty grabbed a hold of the back of his blue and white t-shirt (his over-shirt long since discarded), and tugged him back. "Would you sit down, Energizer-Buneary."

"Pikachupi pi pika chu pikapi," Pikachu said in a stern voice.

"Suck up," Ash said to the Pokémon with a shake of his head. Still, he crossed his legs and leaned back, his arms propping him up. He tilted his head back, looking towards the Lucario that was looking around the edges of the camp.

Serena watched with interest as she looked towards Ash and then nodded to the hill silently. Ash shook his head, and Ria sighed, walking over and sitting down by him and Pikachu. "How did I not notice that before?" Everyone looked towards her, and her cheeks turned pink. "Sorry, I just...the way you talk to Ria, and all your Pokémon. I thought it was cool but I never thought about how you did it. I just thought you trained them really well."

"It does take a lot of training," Ash admitted. "With Ria it's different. She has Aura too so we can actually talk to each other without saying anything. It's pretty cool. It's not the same with the other Pokémon. It's more like...I can feel what they feel and they can feel what I feel through this crazy Aura-bond-thing." He laughed and rubbed the back of his head. "Sometimes we get mixed up, but the longer we keep working together, the easier it is!"

"Pi pikachu!"

"Yeah, and Pikachu has a special one. It's stronger than the others." Ash shrugged his shoulders.

"Huh," Serena fanned herself with her hat as she thought about that. It made sense but at the same time it didn't. She didn't know much about Aura though.

"I wish this stupid hill had some trees," Misty muttered as she pulled off her red boots for a little while. "Some shade would be nice. I feel like my brain's getting fried by the sun."

Ash's smile fell as he looked towards the redhead. His fingers ran along the edge of his mega bracelet as his eyes narrowed in thought, but then he perked up a bit, smiling again. Reaching up, he took his mostly black and red hat off of his head and set it down on Misty's.

She blinked up at him with surprise, before smiling slightly. "I wasn't hinting for you to give me your hat, you know."

"I know," he agreed jovially. "The sun doesn't bother me much though. Plus, you know, it's not like I have brain cells to worry about, right?" She snorted with amusement.

"God you two are sickeningly cute, makes me wanna gag," Gary mumbled a bit, his arm resting over his eyes.

"Don't be a jealous asshat," Leaf chimed in.

"They...don't like each other, do they?" Serena asked as the two other Pallet natives started exchanging snarky remarks.

"Oh no, they do," Ash assured her confidently. "This is just what they do." He shrugged his shoulders. "They never feel all that angry, at least."

"Feel angry?" Clemont wondered. "You mentioned it before, but you can do that with Aura? Tell what people are feeling?"

"If I try, it's umm...Ria?" He looked back at his Pokémon almost helplessly.

She sighed and shook her head. *"Aura is life energy. Or that's the easiest way to put it anyway. Everything living has a unique aura. Sometimes even non-living things can sometimes have the energy running through it. The earth itself does. You reflect your thoughts, feelings and intentions in your aura. If the feelings are strong enough, they can sometimes change someone's aura for good."*

"So, can you actually see it? Or is it just feelings?" the blond boy asked. He didn't want to interrogate his friend or the pokemon, but he was curious. He had read about Aura before, but there was so little known about it. Most of what was classified as mythology.

"I can see it, all the time." Ash closed his eyes. "I can see the outlines of everything like this. Had to learn how to pretty much tune it out. Things like plants and the stuff that goes through the earth is just this pale, blue-green colour. Pokémon and people have different ones though. It's pretty cool! I can tell who you guys are without needing to see you!"

"Mine's yellow, or so he says," Misty said, pointing at herself.

"Mostly," Ash corrected her, narrowing his eyes as he stared at her. He was so used to just tuning it all out that he had to really pay attention to pick up on all the small details. "It's bright and kind of looks a bit like fire. There's more blue in it now too." He shrugged his shoulders and then looked at Serena. "Yours is mostly red. When I first met you it was this pretty pale colour, but it's gotten bright and...happier. Red and pink and a lot calmer than Misty's." He looked around. "Clemont's is light blue but there's light yellow too and I think that's because of Bonnie. Um, Gary has a lot of purple while Leaf's is kind of a...teal colour?" He looked towards Ria, who nodded her head. "When you feel strongly about something they get brighter or lash out and things like that. It's actually really cool."

"We'll have to take your word for it," Gary spoke up to them for the first time since their conversation about Aura started. He and Leaf were done snapping at each other, listening to the other conversation instead. "Not like we can see it."

"Riley says there is a way," Ash said, but the excitement that was in his voice vanished almost immediately. His shoulders slumped a bit. Ria and Pikachu both looked up at him sadly. "Riley taught me a lot and now he's gone."

"Gone?" Leaf sat up all the way, staring at them with wide eyes. "You're talking about Aura Guardian Riley, right? How can he be gone?" Gary looked just as confused.

It took the other four a moment to realize that they had never told the two specifics about the hit list that they found. Ash looked at the ground, unable to find the words to explain it. Instead, Clemont was the one that explained the list they found to Gary and Leaf.

"Mew," the brunet muttered and shook his head in disbelief. "That's crazy."

"It makes sense though." Everyone looked towards Leaf, who was staring up at the sky with a grim expression on her face. "Imagine, if you wanted to take over a region, and you have all your troops in place. Still, you want to guarantee you'll win, so you start grabbing trainers with unique abilities that won't help you. You get the trainers that have a lot of knowledge about certain things. The others that have stood up to you before. The ones that seem promising." She tilted her head towards Ash. "Your name was at the bottom, right? So you probably weren't that important...uh...to them. Sorry." He just waved her off. "Right, well don't let it go to your head, but you're a promising trainer. That might be why they targeted you, but you also weren't that big of a deal. There's no way in hell they knew about your Aura or being the Chosen One."

"I agree with that," Gary nodded and then frowned even more. "Makes you wonder though. You've had Team Rocket stalking you for years. How do they not know about any of that?"

"Jessie, James, Meowth..." Ash closed his eyes, remembering back to when he had seen James last. He sold them popsicles at the semi-finals in Kalos. There had been nothing different about his aura, nothing strange. Ash knew from past experience that out of the three of them, James wore his feelings on his sleeve. "I don't think they knew. At least not what was going to happen to me. I...I don't think they told anyone either. About the legends...or me."

"I have a question though." Misty fixed the hat that she wore, pushing it out of her eyes. "Say you're right about that list and what it was. Why weren't the Gym Leaders, the Elite Four, hell, why weren't the Champions, on it?"

"Someone would notice that right away," Leaf answered immediately. "Hell, I'm willing to bet they put off grabbing Ash and realized that they had to get a move on and do it, that's why they struck in the league. Stupid, because that was when you were in the spotlight. Everything about what they did with you just sounds botched."

"Let's hope they don't catch wind that we're trying to stop them," Clemont spoke up, his voice wary. "We'll all get on a list then."

"We should really just focus on our next move, shouldn't we?" Serena asked. "So we don't get caught and we know what we're doing."

"It's an idea." Gary turned to look at Ash. "So once we get to the Ilex Forest, then what? You haven't shared that yet."

"I...it's..." He faltered a bit. The teenager hadn't brought anything up yet because he wasn't sure how to broach the topic with his friends. As far as they knew, legendary Pokémon were causing havoc all over the world, and here they were, running after one. "It's a starting point. A place where we'll get some answers about what to do next. It's hard to explain right now so just...trust me?"

Misty put her hand on top of his and nodded her head. Gary, Leaf, Serena and Clemont all exchanged looks before the blond boy nodded his head, "Of course." He perked up a bit as he started digging through his bag. "You guys just reminded me. I made these a while back for us and Bonnie." The gym leader nodded towards Ash and Serena. "I didn't get them finished until the end." He took four small objects out.

"Are these walkie-talkies?" Misty asked as she picked on up.

"Yeah," he rubbed the back of his head with an embarrassed laugh. "They have a pretty good range on them. I only have four, but they're solar powered so just in case, some of us can have them."

"You'll definitely need this then," the redhead passed the one in her hand to her boyfriend. "You're a walking trouble magnet." Ash didn't even bother to look insulted by her truthful statement.

"I think you, Gary and Leaf should have the other ones," Serena suggested while facing Clemont.

"Why's that?"

"Well it just...makes sense." She shrugged her thin shoulders. "If we need Misty, Ash will most likely be right there. And me, I'll probably be with you."

"Makes sense to me," Leaf agreed as she snatched on up. "This is a good idea, Clemont. Just in time too. Hate to say it, but we should get going again." Looking down the steep hill, she sighed. "The forest isn't that far, and then we'll be out of these stupid mountains. It'll be harder for anyone to spot us." She picked up the last walkie-talkie and tossed it to Gary, who grabbed it as he got up.

Clemont groaned a little louder than he meant to, but luckily, Ash just laughed and stood up. He reached out, pulling his blond friend up off of the ground. Beside them, Serena stood up and stretched out her arms.

"At least we're going downhill," Misty said brightly as she pulled her red boots back on and stood up.

"That's something," Serena agreed, and the group gathered their bags. Ria and Pikachu took the lead as they started walking down the side of the hill with caution.

In the distance, a train passed on the tracks.

...

"What are we going to say when we get there?" Max asked, as he stretched his arms out above his head. The trains were fast, but it still took several hours to get from Goldenrod to Blackthorn. The young boy was glad to be up on his feet again. He yawned and pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose as he looked around. Blackthorn City wasn't as busy as Goldenrod, and there was this strange, heavy tension in the air that he didn't like.

They weren't even off the train yet.

"Well, they're going to know someone told us," the young man said as he shrugged his bag onto his shoulders. The two made their way off of the train, heading into the terminal. It wasn't busy, but at the entrance, there was a man and a woman checking the IDs of anyone walking through. "Might as well go." He dug through his pocket, taking out his wallet to show his card ID while Max brought out his Pokédex. No one gave them a second look.

"So should we look at one of the hotels first? Or the Pokémon Center?" Max asked curiously.

"No, that girl, Bonnie, she said that Clair was with them. Lance and Clair Greyson are cousins, so if he was shipping them around anywhere, he probably wouldn't put them in a hotel. Starting at the gym is our best bet." The future Pokémon doctor nodded his head. "Follow me."

Max stuck close to Brock, feeling uncomfortable in the city. Everyone appeared so tense and worried, and both males were starting to think that they had missed out on something big.

Getting to the gym from the train station wasn't all that hard, especially since there was no one around to stop them. They walked right up to the front doors, only to find them locked tightly. Max looked at Brock, not quite sure what to do, so the young man just lifted his hand and knocked.

At first, they both thought that there was no one there. Then the door flew open and Clair Greyson herself stood before them, looking tired yet still fierce. "I'm sorry, I'm not accepting any battles for the foreseeable..." She trailed off as her blue eyes landed on Brock. "I know you."

"Yeah. I'm Brock Slate. I used to be the Pewter City Gym Leader, and we met before when my friend, Ash, was trying to get your badge."

"Ash Ketchum?" She said, her hand resting on her hip as she raised an eyebrow. "Well, either this is a happy coincidence, or someone told you where to look." She pushed the door open wider and said, "Come in. My cousin will want to talk to you no doubt."

It sounded welcoming, but Brock got the distinct impression that she was unhappy about something. He tensed up his shoulders as he walked inside, staying close to Max, more for the younger boy's sake than himself. Though he already got that impression by the time they got on the train, it hit Brock now that they had just walked into something bigger than he could have imagined.

...

Despite their intrusion into their sanctuary, the Elders of Blackthorn City were quite welcoming. It went against all the rumours that Delia had heard in the past about them being cold and slightly malicious people. In retrospect, that was probably just her father making up stories.

The Elders gladly gave her use of the kitchen, which was good because it took her mind off of things. Amanda, no, she supposed that the name Green fit the woman so much more at the moment, was off doing something. It was so strange, how Amanda was the woman who laid around her house, barely taking care of her own daughter out of some form of self-pity about her deeds in the past. Green was a woman who didn't play by all the rules but knew how to get a job done.

The brunette set down the knife she was using to chop onions and just stared ahead in thought. She wasn't much better. As Delia, she was a quirky mother who loved her son dearly and would do anything for him and his friends. She was a pillar. A home. Once upon a time, when her own locks of hair reflected the name, she had been Yellow. A Pokémon trainer who got into just as much trouble as her own son did now.

The only difference was that he didn't hide behind a nickname. It was more dangerous, since he wouldn't just be able to disappear like she and to a lesser extent, Amanda had. Delia knew the potential consequences of that could be devastating. Especially after what happened to poor Blue and his wife.

A clank startled her, and she looked around to see Grace putting a pot on the stove. She pressed her lips together in a thin line, her brow furrowed. The woman had been more than a little unhappy since Serena left with Ash and the others. Meyer took it in strides, glad that Bonnie was still there with them. He himself wanted to try and help the G-Men in some capacity with whatever was happening. They weren't exactly sharing details, but he was still off somewhere with Green.

Delia looked back towards the onions just as Grace asked, "How can you be so calm?"

"Crying and pouting isn't going to do anyone any good," Ash's mother said as she started dicing. "I know you're worried about Serena. I'm worried about Ash, but they're stronger than we give them credit for. Could you really have stopped her from going if you knew?" Grace stared at her for a moment before sighing and looking at the pot, piling already chopped carrots into the water. "No, maybe not."

She paused. "Before she met your son, I could never picture Serena doing something like this. Not putting herself in danger."

"It's true, trouble follows that boy everywhere. It always has. But he brings out the best in people, even if it doesn't seem like it at first. Just keep telling yourself it'll be okay."

The other woman was about to reply when footsteps caught their attention. They looked around as Tracey came in, appearing bemused about something. "So apparently we're going to have more people here for a little while."

"Huh?" Delia blinked with surprise when Brock and Max walked in, both looking rather sheepish. Her surprise faded away, replaced with a big smile. "Brock! Max! What are you doing here?"

"We called your emergency phone. Bonnie answered and told us where you were and now here we are." Brock shrugged his shoulders.

"I think Lance took it," Max added sheepishly. "We had to tell him how we were talking to her. Sorry."

"Oh, it's okay," Delia assured them. "Come in, we're just making supper. You're both okay?"

"Yeah, sure," the older of the two said with a sigh. "Just a lot to take in, since Lance brought us up to speed on the things that were happening in Kanto."

"I'm sure your brothers and sisters are fine," Ash's mother assured him.

"I hope so, but it would be a lot easier to believe if the world wasn't coming to an end."

...

"Thank god the sun's going down," Misty moaned as she finally gave Ash his hat back. Though they were traveling in the trees, it was taking them a little bit longer than expected to get into the sections that would protect them from the sun's hot rays. "If it stays this hot, we might have to travel by night."

"Pi pikachu," the small Pokémon nodded his head in agreement, ears drooping.

"What are you complaining about?" Ash playfully flicked the Pokémon. "You've been freeloading this entire time." Pikachu jokingly tried to bite at his finger in response.

"Are we going to set up a sleep schedule like last night?" Serena asked curiously as she looked up at the twilight sky.

"We'll switch it up some," Gary replied. "That way you don't get stuck with always getting up early." She just shrugged her shoulders.

Ria, silently walking ahead of them, suddenly came to a stop. Her entire body tensed up, and a moment later, Ash had the exact same reaction. Pokémon and trainer mimicked each other's movements perfectly, looking around and at the ground with confusion. Pikachu's ears completely pressed against his head and he let out a haunting whine.

"What the hell are you—?" Leaf's question was cut off as the ground beneath them started to shake violently. The girl screamed as she pitched forward, slamming into Ash, who then crashed into Gary.

Misty, Serena, Clemont and Ria tried to stay on their feet, but the four of them ended up staggering back and falling to the ground as the shaking became violent. Ear piercing cracks and groans

echoed around them. Misty looked up from where she had fallen, her eyes meeting Ash's for a split second before the ground opened underneath him, Gary, Leaf and Pikachu. All four of them vanishing from sight.

The redhead didn't remember screaming, but from how sore her throat ended up being, she must have as she tried to lunge forward. What she intended to do, the former gym leader didn't know. It didn't matter anyway. Moving quickly, Ria threw her arms up, erecting an Aura Barrier around them seconds before the ground split open by them. With a great push, she managed to roll them all back farther away from it, like a bunch of creatures trapped in an oversized Dedenne-wheel.

They rolled and rolled down the hill that was being formed until the shaking stopped and they slammed into a tree, all of them losing consciousness from the impact.

Chapter End Notes

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

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Aftershocks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Bonnie's eyes fluttered open, and she looked around the room in confusion. She didn't remember going to sleep, in fact she didn't remember much at all. There was rubble around her, and as her memories came rushing back, she realized that things could have been a whole lot worse than they were.

"Dad?" She pushed herself up and looked around. "Dedenne?"

"Denne!" Bonnie whipped her head around at the sound, sighing with relief when she saw the small Pokémon burrow out from underneath a pile of rocks. Dedenne stretched out her tiny arms and legs, sniffing at her own fur before smiling up at the young girl.

Dedenne's expression changed as she looked around Bonnie. Frowning, she darted forward, prompting the girl to follow behind. They managed to get out of the destroyed door that blocked their way, and almost immediately tripped over someone.

A groan echoed through the quiet hallway and she twisted around. "I'm sorry! I—" Bonnie blinked at the young boy, probably a few years older than her. He was slowly opening his eyes, looking through his cracked glasses with confusion.

His brown eyes settled on her and he asked, "What happened? Who are you?"

"I'm Bonnie Liscio and...I think it was an earthquake."

"Earthquakes don't happen in Johto though," he replied with a groan. He pushed himself up into a sitting position and winced as he moved his arm. "Ow."

"Well it did. Come on, we need to find an adult to get you help. Your arm's bleeding." Bonnie jumped to her feet, Dedenne mirroring her actions. She held out a hand to help him up, even though he was taller than her. "What's your name, anyway? Who are you here with?"

"I'm Max Maple," he ignored her hand and pushed himself up, wincing a bit from the action. "I

came with Brock." Worry filtered through his brown eyes as he looked around. "I hope everyone's okay."

"Only one way to find out." Bonnie nodded and started walking ahead. Max stared at the young girl oddly for a moment before hurrying after her, there was no point in getting separated now.

...

Serena was the first one to wake up, the first one to remember what happened, and witness the devastation. A quick check on Clemont, Misty and Ria told her that they were all still breathing. No one appeared to be injured so she got up and took a few steps forward. The earth was torn to shreds around them, all leading to a massive, gaping hole in the ground.

Her whole body felt numb as she walked over the rocks and rubble. Her pace picking up as she got closer to the crack that seemed to extend forever in both directions. Cupping her hands on either side of her face, the blonde yelled, "Ash! Leaf! Gary! Pikachu!" Her voice echoed, but there was no response. When the earthquake hit, the sun was just starting to set and now it was high in the sky, so they had all been out for an alarmingly long time.

A sick feeling welled up in her as she stumbled back from the hole. She looked away from it, the gentle wind blowing her hair into her eyes as tears welled up. If the others had somehow survived the fall but were hurt, it wouldn't matter now. She couldn't see how they would have survived at all.

Taking a deep breath, Serena forced herself to walk back to the others. Only when she got there did she realize that they must have hit some sort of bug-Pokémon nest. There were remnants of sleep powder everywhere. That answered her question about why they slept so long without any major injuries.

The teenager stared at the other two, unsure of what to do or say. Instead, she moved over to the Lucario and shook her. "Ria. Ria, wake up. Please?" Her voice cracked a bit, relief rushing through her as the Pokémon blinked opened her red eyes. Ria stared at her for a moment before jerking to her feet and looking around wildly. "They fell. That's all I remember."

Ria looked at the ground before saying, ***"Misty and Clemont feel fine. They should be waking up soon. I'm going to look myself."*** She jumped back in the direction that the teenager had just come from.

Clemont stirred next, and Serena knelt beside him, waiting for him to get up. He slowly sat up, cracking his neck and then looking at her. She didn't say anything, watching as he remembered exactly what had happened. His bright blue eyes went wide and he said, "Oh Arceus. It wasn't just a nightmare."

"No," Serena replied, shaking her head and wiping the tears away from her eyes. "I—." She stopped as Misty jerked up into a sitting position without warning. She must have woken up at the same time as Clemont, but the blonde girl hadn't noticed.

Misty just stared at the ground blankly, before launching herself up and running forward. Forgetting her conversation with Clemont, Serena sprang up and ran after her. "Misty! Stop!" The other girl was faster, but with adrenaline rushing through her, Serena managed to tackle the other girl to the ground. Looking up, she realized just how close they had both come to pitching over the side of the newly formed cliff.

"Let go of me!" The redhead said fiercely as she struggled, tiny dots of blood from her hands and

knees dripping onto the ground. "We need to find them! We need to find Ash! We have to—!"

"Do what? Jump off after them?" Serena gritted her teeth as she struggled to keep her down. "Do you have any Pokémon that can get us down there?"

"No! I just—I just..." Misty went limp, and for a moment, the other teenager thought that she might have lost consciousness again. Serena moved off of her as the girl pushed herself up, kneeling down and staring at the crack in the ground. Her expression was blank at first, so Serena had the unfortunate privilege of watching realization settle in. "They couldn't have survived that fall." That realization changed into shock and then anger, but as quick as it came, sheer anguish replaced it.

"Misty..." Serena muttered, not quite sure what to do or say. The other girl started breathing in and out rapidly, hugging herself as the tears welled up in her eyes and started to fall. Misty buried her face in her hands as her shoulders started to shake. A couple of small sobs escaped her first, getting louder and louder, though it sounded like she was desperately trying to hide it.

The performer wasn't able to keep her own tears at bay. Drops streamed down her cheeks, but instead of falling into a sobbing mess, she reached forward and hugged Misty. They weren't exactly close, but Serena still wanted to help. She was grieving for Ash, Gary and Leaf too, but it was nothing compared to what Misty was feeling.

Misty didn't push her away, instead, she hugged her back. Her fingers grasped the girl's black shirt as she leaned her head on her shoulder, her entire body shaking as she sobbed.

Ria watched them and took a deep breath. Her paw reached up, brushing against the stone that rested at the center of her sparkly bow, and she closed her red eyes for a moment. They opened again, and she squared her shoulders with determination.

She wasn't ready to give up on her trainer and the others yet.

...

Leaf coughed as she slowly regained consciousness. She blinked several times, but she still couldn't see a thing. Most people in that situation would panic, but she was Leaf Green. A groan escaped her lips and she muttered, "Either I'm blind, or being dead really sucks."

"I don't think it's either."

The other voice startled her, and she twisted around, wincing a bit at the rocks digging into her skin. She reached out, her hand coming into contact with someone's leg. "Ash?"

"Yeah." His voice sounded strained in the darkness. "Gary's right beside me too. He's breathing."

"Not that I'm complaining, but how are we alive? And where are we?"

"I used my Aura," Ash said, and she could hear a bit of shifting. "I got the energy from the earth to pretty much rush out and stop us from time to time. I'm used to it but you and Gary got knocked out. Just a second."

The girl winced in pain as light assaulted her eyes. She closed them, and blinked them open again so she could get used to having her sight back. What she saw confused her a lot. Gary was partially laying on top of Ash, but the other boy was completely ignoring that. He had one of his hands stretched up above them while the other held the tiny sphere that lit up everything around them.

"What are you doing?"

"That's not a ceiling," Ash nodded above them, his arm shaking a bit. "It's a wall of loose rocks that came down after us. I've been holding it up but—" His arm buckled a bit and they came a little closer. "Can you drag Gary? There's a bigger opening that way. Then we won't get crushed."

"Yeah." Leaf had to admit, she was impressed. Though she had no idea what the time was, she got the distinct impression that Ash had been holding those up there for a while. There wasn't much room to move since the rocks were so close to them, so she had to lean across Ash to grab Gary's arms. "Sorry Gare-bear. A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do." She started moving backwards, tugging the heavier boy along after her. Ash moved into a crouching position and followed along after them as they moved down the thin tunnel.

Once they got into a large cave, the raven-haired boy dropped his arm and sighed with relief. The rocks shook the ground a bit as they fell, but he didn't care much, stretching out his sore arm. He then reached down to his belt and pressed a button on one of the Pokéballs, Pikachu appearing a moment later.

"Pikapi pi pikachu." He was clearly unhappy about having to go into the Pokéball.

"I'm sorry, I just didn't want you to get hurt too." He drew his arms close, the pale blue glow of the Aura Sphere casting strange shadows on him as he looked towards Leaf. "Nobody else is down here. I have no idea what happened to them. Either they're too far away for me to feel or..." He trailed off, anguish rushing over his features.

"I'm sure they're fine," Leaf told him, reaching out and putting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure Misty's fine. They have Ria with them, right? So even if they fell somewhere else, she could have done the same as you."

"Yeah," he said slowly, taking a deep breath before nodding his head. "Yeah, you're right. Thanks."

She nodded, and looked around as Gary stirred. He woke up, staring at her before sitting up and looking around. "Well, this is bad."

"It could have been a lot worse," the girl informed him. "It could get a lot worse if we don't get out of here and try to find the others."

"Did you use the walkie-talkies?" They both stared at Gary. "The ones Clemont gave us earlier?" Bright brown met pale brown as Ash and Leaf exchanged rather embarrassed looks. Gary groaned and rolled his eyes, shrugging the bag off of his shoulders and digging through it until he found the small device. A quick press of the buttons caused it to chirp, so it was definitely still working. Whether it would reach anyone else or not was a better question. "Clemont? Serena? Misty? Anyone?" He waited for a few moments. "Guys? Are you okay? Try to say something. Or Ria, if you're there." Only silence answered.

Ash crossed his arms in front of him, leaving the little ball of light to just hover in front of him. He took a deep breath, brown eyes staring at the walkie-talkie as if pleading with it to work. Pikachu mimicked this pose perfectly. Leaf was feeling rather anxious herself, and it only hit her a little later that he was probably feeling that too.

"Gary?" The radio came to life without warning, Clemont's voice coming through. It was scratchy, and somewhat faint, but it was something. "Gary, is that you?"

"Yeah! Ash, Leaf and Pikachu are all here with me! Are you guys okay?" They all waited anxiously for the answer.

"Yeah. We're all here. Where are you?" All four of them let out sighs of relief.

Ash took the radio from Gary. "We're somewhere underground. Pretty far. Where are you guys?"

A moment later, Misty's voice came across, and they could all tell just how upset she was. "We're in the forest. We're all okay but we thought—we thought..." It cut out.

"We're all okay, I promise," Ash's voice shook as he spoke. He looked over towards Gary and Leaf, biting his lip for a moment before bringing the walkie-talkie back up to it. "Guys, I want you to keep going to the Ilex Forest."

"What?" He could hear Clemont and Serena saying the same as Misty in the background. Even Gary and Leaf looked startled.

"We have no idea how long it's going to take us to get out of here," he reasoned. "And we have to get there. I don't know if there's a time limit or anything, but you need to keep going. We'll meet up with you there."

"Are you sure?"

Ash looked towards Gary and Leaf, silently asking for their input. Gary looked up at the rocky ceiling in thought before nodding his head, Leaf mimicking the action a moment later. "Yeah, we're sure."

"And you're all sure you're okay?"

Ash shook his head, more out of amusement than anything else. "We're fine. I promise. Get going."

There was a pause for a moment before Clemont's voice came back over the small device. "We'll meet you there. Be careful!" Then the walkie-talkie went dead.

"Well, at least we know they're okay," Gary supplied as he walked around, his hand running along the wall. "Rock's pretty solid here, it won't be easy to get through."

"You know what I don't get?" Leaf piped up, putting her hands on her hips. "Where did this come from? Earthquakes rarely ever happen in Johto."

Gary stared at her, troubled by that thought as well. Pikachu glanced up at his trainer, tilting his head curiously when he saw the boy wince. "Pikapi?"

Realizing that both of his childhood friends were looking at him, Ash brought the little glowing orb towards his chest. "It was weird. It was like...it felt like a Pokémon attack. That's why I noticed something strange just before it happened."

"A Pokémon...do you think Team Rocket did this?" Leaf's eyes narrowed as she spat, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"I don't know," he admitted, holding out his arm so Pikachu could jump up onto it and climb onto his shoulder.

"If a Pokémon did this, the only explanation is a legendary Pokémon," Gary said, his voice firm, leaving no room for argument. "And you know, that's kind of terrifying. No Kanto legendary could do this, so if it's not natural, another one had to have done it. Groudon or Regigigas. And that would mean that maybe it's not just Kanto and Johto this is happening to."

"Arceus said something like there are more enemies than we think," Ash said slowly. "Maybe the other Teams..." He trailed off, not wanting to think about it.

The three of them stood in tense silence at the horrible possibilities of their collective train of thought. Gary was the first to shake his head and break out of the stunned daze that they were in. "Doesn't matter right now. We need a plan to get out of here." He looked towards Ash. "You were the one telling your girlfriend to keep going and we'd meet up. You got any ideas? Or just making promises to comfort her?"

The raven-haired teenager scowled at him. "I don't make promises I'm not going to keep." Even Pikachu seemed insulted by the jab. Ash reached down to his belt, grabbing one of the Pokéballs there. "I have Garchomp with me and he can help dig us out of here."

"That's an idea," Leaf agreed, lost in thought before she snapped her fingers. "I have Ditto with me. She can transform into a Garchomp and help!"

"My Nidoking could help with that too," Gary agreed. "But we need to figure out which direction to dig in first. It'll have to be a sloping tunnel since I don't think any of us want to climb a sheer cliff." The other two nodded in agreement.

"Ditto needs to be with Garchomp to stay in that form. Maybe they can take shifts with Nidoking so that it's not just three Pokémon going at once," Leaf suggested.

"I think that's the best plan we're going to get," the green-eyed boy admitted.

"Pi pikachu." The Pokémon slumped down on his trainer's shoulder.

"Yeah, this is going to take a while," he agreed. "Wish I found a Garchompite. Would have made this a lot easier." Ash tossed the Pokéball up into the air.

The large, dragon-type Pokémon shook his head as he appeared. He growled, looking around their confined space and then his trainer with confusion.

"Up for some digging?" Ash asked, keeping a cheerful voice.

"Gar?" The Pokémon looked down as Ditto appeared beside it. He sniffed the other Pokémon and then looked back at Ash, nodded towards it. "Gar garchomp?"

"No, you can't chew on her," his trainer deadpanned, looking towards Leaf with exasperation.

She laughed. "Ditto, transform."

The Pokémon shifted, and Garchomp scurried away, staring at this new Garchomp with confusion. He looked at Ash, back to Ditto, and then back to his trainer once again, wanting an explanation for what just happened.

He rubbed the Pokémon's muzzle. "It's fine. That's just what Ditto do. I forgot you've never seen one before. Anyway, we're stuck down here, and we're going to dig our way out. She's going to help you."

Garchomp considered this for a moment before grumbling towards the transformed Ditto. The two Pokémon went to the wall and started digging their way through.

...

"You two, come with me. Now."

Brock and Tracey exchanged confused glances, but they were quick to get to their feet. Brock glanced at the bandaged gash on Max's arm again, just to make sure that it was fine before he left. The young boy was so focused on Dedenne that he didn't even notice. Everything looked fine, so he turned his attention back to Tracey and nodded.

The two young man followed the Champion of Kanto and Johto, his cape billowing behind him.

"You're going to listen and do everything I say, exactly as I tell you, do you understand?" Lance asked them, leaving no room for argument.

They exchanged looks again and Brock said, "Sure, but what's this about?"

"As of right now you're both being recruited into the G-Men." There was no arguing with his tone of voice, though it still startled them a bit. Neither of them were the type to jump into danger or be the hero.

"Why?" Tracey finally asked the question that they were both wondering.

"If you must know, we need every trustworthy resource we can get right now." Lance shook his head and glanced at them over his shoulder. "Since you're going to be in on the situation anyway, I'll be honest. Team Rocket planted agents within the G-Men, though their focus was Kanto. We're being careful with Johto, because their agents might just be waiting for some signal. So trust no one. We've been playing it down a lot, but Team Rocket has been working towards something over the past few years." He smiled bitterly. "I guess we finally know what it is."

"So you had some sort of warning?"

"No. We had a bunch of different pieces that didn't fit together. A lot makes sense now, but a lot still doesn't. We need people we can trust, and I'm counting on you as two of those people."

"Yes," Brock said, because he didn't want to sit around while bad things were happening. Maybe it was because he got dragged along on so many adventures when he was younger, but he wanted to help in any way that he could. Even if it was just being a field doctor for Pokémon or something.

That thought sent a shiver up the young man's spine. In his mind, he was already thinking of this as a war.

"Where are we going exactly?" Tracey asked as they followed Lance into another building.

"Ever been on a helicopter?"

"Yes," they both answered at the same time.

"Good, because you're coming up in one with me. We're going to the Johto-Kanto border, and I need some people who I know won't push me out." Not that he had to worry, since he had his dragon Pokémon with him.

Brock and Tracey exchanged tense looks. Not because of what they were doing, but rather for the fact that the Champion of Kanto and Johto felt like there was no one else he could trust. Things were much worse than they thought.

Leaf's mother was waiting for them. She was standing beside a tall, elegant Pidgeot, stroking the powerful Pokémon's feathers. The woman turned her head towards them, and Brock was once

again taken back by just how much the woman's daughter looked like her. Their eyes and the colour of their hair were the biggest differences between the two at first glance.

"She's beautiful," Tracey said, looking at the Pidgeot in awe.

Green smiled and nodded her head. "She is. One of the strongest Pidgeot in the world. She's going to be flying along with us." She paused for a moment and added, "She belongs to Master Red."

Both young men jerked with surprise, staring at the Pokémon with even more awe and respect than before. "He's here?" Brock asked eagerly.

Green and Lance exchanged looks before the Champion said, "No. Master Red is gone. We presume alive, but in the hands of Team Rocket." He held up a hand before either of them could react. "We are keeping this information under wraps, and I hope I'm not misplacing my trust."

They both nodded their heads, still a bit numb from shock. Brock had to wonder what they were getting themselves into when the Pokémon Master himself was already gone.

...

"Late last evening, a massive earthquake rocked Johto and Kanto. Experts say it was beyond any magnitude ever measured before. Leading researchers show—."

"Breaking news! Team Rocket has claimed yet another natural disaster—."

"...Legendary Pokémon..."

"...Regigigas..."

"...Live footage provided by eye witnesses..."

"...First view of the total damage..."

"...Completely splitting Johto from Kanto..."

"...No statement from Master Lance, but he will be holding a press conference early tomorrow morning. This will mark the first time that the Champion has spoken publicly since Team Rocket's initial attack on Cerulean City in Kanto."

Delia turned off the television and set the remote down. Power had come back rather quickly, all things considered. The media was all over the story about what they thought was a natural disaster. Once again, with Regigigas at his side this time, Giovanni broke onto the airwaves and made a statement.

"He's showing off," Grace noted from where she sat beside Bonnie.

The brunette nodded her head in agreement. "He's trying to make everyone afraid."

"That'll never work though, right?" Bonnie asked, her big blue eyes glancing at everyone in the room in turn. "People won't listen to him when he says to just stay in their homes and not cause problems, right?"

Delia and Grace exchanged grim looks. Max looked around at the younger girl and shook his head. "It wouldn't make sense for most people to fight back right now. He's controlling the legendary Pokémon."

"So what? If everyone fought together, they wouldn't stand a chance."

"Maybe," he conceded. "But they won't."

Bonnie narrowed her eyes at the boy and then looked down at Dedenne, running her fingers through the Pokémon's fur. Her shoulders slumped a bit. "Maybe. They didn't help all the other times. They just watched."

Her words rang true, but there wasn't anything they could do at the moment but wait and watch.

...

"I have no idea where we are." It wasn't an easy thing for Misty to admit as she crumbled the map shut, but they were lost. It had been a long time since she got lost in the middle of the Johto woods. She travelled on her own, and with May for brief periods of time while the other girl participated in Johto contests. Still, they stuck close to the trails, the oceans and the lakes back then so she could search for water Pokémon.

For the first time, she was relieved that Ash wasn't there. Just the mental image of his amused and smug smirk put her in a bit of a tizzy.

Misty looked around to Ria, and the Pokémon just shrugged. ***"Don't look at me, I've never been here."***

"You can't see where we are with your Aura?" Serena asked her curiously.

"No. If that was the case, Ash wouldn't have got us lost so many times," the Lucario replied dryly. No one could argue with that.

"So what do we do? We need to get to the Ilex Forest." The younger girl put her hand on her hip as she tried to think.

Pushing his glasses up the brim of his nose, Clemont chuckled. "Don't worry ladies! I've got this!" He pointed at his head. "All the answers are here and with the power of science, we'll be able to find our way out of here in no time!"

Misty blinked and stared at Clemont oddly. Serena sighed, resting a hand against the tree as she shook her head. The two teenagers exchanged looks and the blonde said, "He does this sometimes. We should probably back up."

"Why?" Misty asked, watching the blond boy dig through his bag, pulling a few things out. "Ash says his inventions are amazing."

"Amazing, yes," Serena agreed, nodding her head as she watched Clemont work. "But the thing is —." Ria jumped in front of them just as whatever the boy was doing backfired, sending smoke in all directions. Her Aura Shield spared the two girls.

"Sometimes that happens..." the blonde girl finished. She turned her attention to the boy in question. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he brushed himself off, trying to flatten down his messed up hair. "That didn't work out how I imagined."

Ria shook her head but then tensed up. In the brief moment of excitement, she let her guard slip, and that proved to be a mistake. She pivoted around and launched an Aura Sphere behind her,

slamming a tall Ursaring to the ground.

"Run!" She yelled as more of the creatures approached. She sensed them when they were farther away, but the explosion led to a brief moment of distraction. That led to the cranky Pokémon getting far too close without her realizing it. Ria launched herself at one, and everyone else scattered.

"Luxray!" Clemont tossed a Pokéball, and his powerful electric-type came out, ready to fight. "Use Thunder Wave!"

Misty ended up stumbling another direction, releasing a Pokémon of her own. "Starmie! Use Rapid Spin!" She barely got the words out of her mouth before the Pokémon was attacking.

Serena didn't have as much luck. She reached for her Pokéballs to release Delphox, but ended up too close to another Ursaring. She screamed and ducked, avoiding the claw that lashed out at her. Throwing herself down and then out of the way, her bag ended up flying, landing out of arm's reach and taking her Pokémon with it. She pushed herself up to run to it, when pain stabbed through her leg.

Serena didn't look up as she held her bleeding knee, she could see the shadow of the Pokémon as it loomed over her. She took a deep breath, preparing to throw herself out of the way again. She wasn't going to let a sore knee get herself killed. Without warning, electricity surrounded the Ursaring. It roared and then fell to the ground in a twitching, unconscious heap.

"Serena!" Clemont hurried over, kneeling down beside her. "Are you o—ow, that had to hurt." He caught sight of her wounded leg almost, the blood seeping through her dark socks. He looked around, watching as Luxray, Starmie and Ria pushed back the sleuth of Ursaring. They had a little bit of time. "Roll down your sock so I can see your knee."

She did as he asked, wincing when she saw the scrape on her leg. It wasn't all that bad, the most painful part was the bruising all around it rather than the small cuts themselves. It still hurt to move.

Clemont bit his lip but then nodded his head. He rummaged through his utility belt until he found a clean, white handkerchief. He wrapped it around her leg tightly and said, "It'll have to do for now. We need to get out of here." The boy felt awful. It was his invention backfiring that drew the Pokémon to them in the first place, so the least he could do was help his friend. He stood up and held his hand out to her. "Come on, I'll help you."

Serena blinked, eyes going wide as she stared at Clemont's hand. Slowly, her eyes looked up into his puzzled ones as he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she replied quickly, reaching up and taking his hand. With a grunt, Clemont helped her off of the ground, but had to grab her upper arms to keep her from falling back down. Serena gritted her teeth and tried to walk forward, but stumbled a bit, grabbing a hold of him to keep steady.

"Come on, I'll help you." He threw her arm over his shoulder, his hand going around her waist as he helped her limp around the unconscious Ursaring. "Luxray! Come here!"

"We got this!" Misty assured the Pokémon, who was quick to run back to his trainer after that.

Luxray sniffed Serena's knee and looked up at her sadly. "I know," Clemont said. "Think you can give her a lift?"

"Oh! He doesn't have..." Serena trailed off as the Pokémon already leaned down and nodded

towards his back. "No really, it's okay."

"Get on, we need to go fast and you'll be slower than me with that knee." She couldn't argue with that logic, allowing her friend to help her up onto his Pokémon's back. Once he was sure that Serena was on the Pokémon securely, he turned to look at Misty. "Come on!"

Misty ran, Ria bounding beside her. The group took off deeper into the forest, not caring if they were going the right direction or not. They just wanted to get away from the angry Pokémon.

...

"Why do you think they attacked us?" Misty asked Ria once they stopped. There had been no breaks since the surprise attack of the bear Pokémon, just them moving until the sun started to set. "The Ursaring?"

"The earthquake probably drew them together," the Pokémon shrugged. "It most likely put a lot of Pokémon on edge. Not to mention the legendary Pokémon are acting like little children."

"That makes sense," the redhead nodded. She glanced around at her two traveling companions, watching as Serena sat with her injured leg stretched out in front of her. She was watching Clemont putter around as he tried to whip up some sort of food. Misty watched the two of them for moment, smiling a bit when she saw the girl reach down and play with the handkerchief that was around her knee. Though they had cleaned it up, she insisted that they didn't need to waste any of their bandages on her. They didn't have that many on them, since most of the first aid supplies had been on Ash, given that he was usually the one who hurt himself. In turn, they had most of the food.

They would need to divide their resources more evenly when they met up again. For now though, there was nothing that they could do. Misty walked over, sitting down by Serena and putting a hand on her shoulder. The other girl jumped at the contact. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay." She turned her head back to Clemont, blue eyes studying her other friend for a moment. Misty didn't say anything, she just waited until Serena finally spoke again. "Clemont saved me."

"I saw."

"That...I was going to move on my own. I would have done it, but...I'm glad he was there."

"He's a good friend, isn't he?" Serena looked up at Misty with an odd expression. There was something about that question that struck her as odd, though she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Her blue eyes dropped back to her knees before darting back up to watch Clemont as he cooked. A small smile passed over her features as she glanced back at Misty. "Yeah. He is."

Chapter End Notes

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Winding Roads

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



"Are you sure we're going the right direction?"

"Of course we are. You doubt me?"

"See the thing is, it's a bit hard to tell landmarks apart. You know, since we're under the freaking ground!"

"We're going the right direction!"

"Cause you say so?"

"It's better than you saying so!"

Pikachu didn't like being underground. It was no surprise, since his powers were weak against ground-types. The element surrounding him didn't put him at ease by any means. So he clung to Ash's shoulder, his ears twitching as he fought against the urge to shock Gary and Leaf. He could control the voltage, hitting with an attack that looked like it should have killed someone but it was fairly harmless. There was still the chance that he could cause a cave-in and that was the last thing he wanted.

Nidoking had led the way for a while, but Garchomp and Ditto-turned-Garchomp were once again tunneling through the ground. Their combined power got the group much farther than Nidoking (though he did an amazing job too), and caused a lot more noise. Despite the sound of the two Pokémon ripping apart the earth in front of them, Gary and Leaf somehow managed to be even louder.

Pikachu sighed and pressed his paws over his ears, balancing precariously on his trainer's shoulder.

Ash didn't take much notice of this though, keeping his eyes locked on the two Pokémon that were leading the way. The tiny Aura Sphere still illuminated the tunnel, eerily hanging midair in front of him the entire time.

The electric-type looked towards his trainer with exasperation, unable to block out the sound. His expression turned curious when he realized that Ash was mumbling to himself.

"...No that's not right. How do I say that? This is harder than I thought it would be..."

"Pikapi?" Pikachu tilted his head. "Pi pikachu pi pika?"

A bit startled, Ash looked towards his friend and then laughed a bit. "I'm fine. I'm writing an apology letter to Brock in my head. Tracey too."

"Pi?"

Ash pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "If Misty and I were as bad as those two, I really, really owe them one."

"Pikachupi pika cha pikachu."

"Shut up we were not worse."

"Pi pikachu pika pika chu cha pi."

"How do you even know what sexual tension means?" He stared at his Pokémon oddly and then shook his head. "Never mind. I don't want to know." He looked back at Gary and Leaf. Despite Pikachu's claims, there was no way that he and Misty were this bad when they were younger. No possible way.

Garchomp and Ditto stopped, Ash pausing not far behind them. Leaf and Gary didn't even notice and almost walked into him.

"Sorry," Leaf muttered as she regained her footing. The tunnel had gotten steep over the past little while, and the last thing they wanted was to roll back down. They caved in the tunnel behind them every once in a while but it would still be a nasty slide down to the last wall.

"Maybe you should pay more attention," Gary snarked and Leaf whipped around to glare at him.

"I'm going to push both of you back down if you don't stop!" Ash snapped, completely fed up with them. Yes, he really owed Brock and Tracey apologies. He also came to the realization that they had the patience of gods to deal with this type of thing all the time.

His two friends stared at him with wide eyes, not expecting him to snap.

Garchomp looked at him and growled. "Gar garchomp chomp cho."

Ash looked up with interest, and Pikachu hopped off of his shoulder. The teenager climbed up onto his dragon-type's back, reaching up and touching the spot just above his head.

"What are you doing?" Leaf asked him, putting a hand on her hip.

Ash opened his eyes again. "We're right beneath the surface. They should be able to break out in a minute."

"Where are we?"

He stared at them. "I'm not a GPS. I know there's no people up there but I have no idea where we are." He slid off of Garchomp's back and picked Pikachu up again. "Alright, go for it."

Garchomp and Ditto both reared back before attacking the tunnel's ceiling together.

Leaf took a few steps back to avoid any falling rocks, but realized that they were harmlessly bouncing off of something. Coming to the conclusion that Ash must have put up a barrier to stop them from getting crushed by anything, she walked up to his side and watched. "It'll be nice to breathe fresh air again."

"You act like it's been a hundred years or something," Gary toned in, walking up to Ash's other side.

"Really?" Leaf shot him an annoyed look. "Do you need to comment on everything that I say?"

"Don't," Ash groaned, trying to resist the urge to bash his head on the wall of the tunnel. "Please don't. I've been writing apology letters to Brock in my head for all the times Misty and I fought. Tracey too. It's been that bad. Stop." They both just stared at him as his demand turned into a plea.

"We've just been stuck underground too long," Gary said after a moment of silence. His viridian eyes looking at where the Pokémon were digging. "When are they going to—?" He cut himself off as Garchomp finally broke through to the surface and the sweet scent of fresh air washed over them.

Pikachu darted up Garchomp's back first, visually scouting out the area around them. "Pi pikapi!" At his confirmation that the coast was clear, Ash climbed up next, with Gary and Leaf following. Garchomp grumbled at them unhappily. Ash flopped back onto the ground, taking in the feel of the grass against his arms and the cool air in his lungs. The Aura Sphere that he had been carrying around vanished. Though it was night, the sky was clear and the moonlight illuminated everything around them. As much as he wanted to see the sun again, it was best that it was nighttime. Coming out to the harsh sunlight might have messed with their eyes a little too much.

Leaf flopped down not far from him, pulling a Pokéball out of the inside of her vest. "Thank you, Ditto. You did good."

"You too," Ash pressed the button on his to call back Garchomp. He looked over at Gary as his friend laid between him and Leaf. "Why are you guys arguing so much?" It wasn't any of his business but it was genuinely bothering him. He wondered why Brock never sat down and had a conversation with him and Misty, but that might have been because they were just kids. "Is it drive Ash crazy day or something?"

"No, of course not, we just..." Leaf trailed off and looked around at Gary. He opened his mouth to speak, but his brow furrowed as he snapped it shut again.

Gary sat up and looked up to the sky with a sigh. "Do you guys remember when we were little, my father took us camping? The time we ended up catching three matching boots and we got really confused?"

Leaf and Ash both exchanged looks behind his back before sitting up. Leaf nodded her head. "Yeah. I mean, it was only just outside of Pallet, but it was pretty exciting. Why?"

"That's one of the last good memories I have of him. One of the last ones I have of the three of us being friends." He shook his head, brown locks falling into his eyes. "He was always so busy with one thing or another, so it was nice. I mean, I loved my mom and my Aunt Daisy too, but I saw

them all the time. I just...I don't have many memories of him at all. I know I used to have a lot of good ones with you guys, but after they all died I just...I can't remember anymore. I remember all the bad things though."

On either side of him, Ash and Leaf exchanged glances once again. Ash smiled a bit as he looked towards the sky. "We used to do this all the time. We'd stay up late and watch the stars, trying to look for legendary Pokémon in the sky."

"We promised that we'd all leave home together," Leaf added, her lips tilting up into a sad smile. "We did..."

"It wasn't what we meant though," Gary finished her thought and tilted his head to look at Ash. "Maybe that's why we fight so much. There are just so many bad memories."

Ash leaned forward to look at his two childhood friends. "But...that doesn't make sense. You were worse to me than Leaf and we don't fight that much anymore. Not like you guys."

Leaf laughed at that. "Not everyone is like you, Ash." She looked up towards the sky. "You know, I'll try. Try to fight less. There are worse things than getting annoyed and petty arguments, right?" She directed the question at Gary.

His viridian eyes studied her for a moment before nodding his head. "Yeah. You're right." He looked around at Ash. "Don't worry about it, okay? We'll try not to drive you crazy."

Ash looked from one to the other, not quite understanding what was going on, but he shrugged it off, looking up towards the sky instead. Pikachu hopped up onto his lap, and he held the Pokémon close.

...

"We're close to Violet City," Clemont noted, looking at the electronic map. He finally got it working without anymore explosions or disruptions. "Only 15, maybe 20 minutes away from here by foot."

"We need to go get more bandages and disinfectant," Misty noted as she brought her bag in front of her and started looking through it. "Some food and water too. We're only halfway to the Ilex Forest." She couldn't hide her exhaustion

Serena frowned from where she was sitting on Luxray's back. She could walk but not as fast as the other two, and they insisted that she stay off of it. It made her feel a little useless, like an extra piece of luggage that they were dragging along with them.

"That's true but..." Clemont trailed off, his blue eyes flickering towards her for a moment. "What if we cheated a bit?"

Misty put a hand on her hip and stared at him. "I'm listening." Ria glanced over at him with silent interest.

"Well, we might get caught by the league but with everything that's happened, I doubt they're actively searching for us. So we could probably get away with using the train system to get to a closer city, if it's still running. What would be the best place to go? "

"Well, Ash said that we have to go to Celebi's Shrine," the redhead said. "That's closer to Azalea Town and there would be less security and cameras there. On the flip side though, there are more people to blend in with in Goldenrod." She looked back at Serena. "What do you think?"

"Me? I don't know anything about Johto."

"No," she conceded, "but we're all involved in this and we gotta choose together, right?"

The blonde girl nodded her head and thought for a moment before she swung her leg over Luxray's back, sliding off of him. She landed on her uninjured leg and then lowered the other one so she wouldn't jolt it. Swinging her pink bag off of her back, she started to dig through it until she found a case. It contained the same technology as her bag that allowed inanimate objects to shrink down. She had a ton of different props, makeup and other things in it. She held up glasses and a wig. "We could make quick disguises so no one recognizes us right away."

Misty looked at the kit and nodded her head. "It would be enough to throw anyone looking for us off at first glance." She glanced at Clemont. "You're right, they have more important things to worry about than us. Plus we have Ria with us. She can tell if we're in trouble." The Pokémon in question nodded her head in agreement. "Alright, let's do it then."

They all threw on wigs and different sweaters to obscure their clothing. Serena packed everything and stood up straight. She gritted her teeth a little bit but shook her head at Luxray. "I'm okay to walk."

"You sure?" Clemont asked her, blue eyes flashing with worry. "It's no problem, right?" His Pokémon nodded in agreement.

"Don't worry about it, it's not far. Less people will notice us if I don't ride in on the back of a Pokémon anyway," Serena argued, staring at him. "Besides, Ria healed the cut for me quite a bit."

The Pokémon looked down with embarrassment. Healing had never been her greatest strength and she often struggled with the simplest of injuries, but she tried her best.

"She's right, and I can help her walk," Misty added with a nod of her head, her bright green wig bouncing with the motion. "Won't be strange to see injured people anyway, so let's go."

He gave up under the pressure of the two teenage girls. It took them less time than Clemont estimated to get to Violet Town, but none of them were complaining.

Serena wasn't quite sure what she expected. Maybe to see a completely desolate city, but there were quite a few people out and about. The only time people looked at them was when they glanced at Ria. She stood out due to her small stature for her species, and the fact that she was wearing a sparkly bow around her ear. It couldn't be helped though, since they didn't have her Pokéball.

"This way," Misty whispered, taking the lead and marching to the train station. She stopped at one of the automatic ticket vendors and pressed her finger to the touch screen. Watching it light up, her eyes scanned the list. "Looks like everything going west is up and running."

"Alright, so get—what are you doing?" Clemont cried out in alarm as Misty started clicking every button three times, the total at the bottom growing and growing.

"Leaf had all the actual money on her," Misty explained. "We need to use a bank account. They'll be able to track us here, but damn if they find out where we're going." The sum at the end was high, but she put through a card that she took out of her bag without flinching.

"That's...really smart," Serena complimented.

"Yeah. The train for Azalea Town leaves in about ten minutes. We have amazing timing," Misty said, nodding towards the interior of the station. "So come on, let's get going. Or does Clemont

need to carry you?"

"No! I'm good!" The blonde girl felt her cheeks heat up, she glanced over at the boy in question, whose face was just as red as hers felt. She tugged a bit at the long wig that she wore, glad that she had it as a substitute for her long-gone locks of hair.

The four of them, including Ria, expected to get stopped or questioned as they walked through the station. They were lucky and didn't run into anyone, and soon found themselves pulling out of Violet City.

...

One step after another, Gary, Leaf, Ash and Pikachu traversed through the forests. Gary was certain that they were drawing closer to their first destination. The plan was for Leaf to sneak into the city, since she was the least recognizable out of the three of them. They had plenty of medication, bandages and things like that, but were getting dangerously low on food.

Gary couldn't help but notice just how tense everything was. Sometimes they'd try to start a conversation, but it just fell flat.

He was surprised that he hadn't picked up on this back when they were underground, but the atmosphere had been the same. Any conversations usually turned into him arguing with Leaf for reasons that he couldn't even explain. Ash would walk ahead of them in silence, something odd for the excitable trainer. They were trying not to fight, but it just happened.

Gary glanced over his shoulder at his two friends, who walked along in silence. Ash was handing Pikachu a couple berries that he had picked earlier, the Pokémon happily eating the treats one by one. Leaf was watching the exchange with a rather amused expression. She looked at him and raised an eyebrow, but he turned back to look ahead.

It was strange, they had known each other pretty much all their lives, yet there didn't seem to be anything to talk about. As he pondered that, it occurred to Gary that this was the first time since they were young that the three of them had been alone together. Normally Misty, Tracey, or someone else was there with them.

They were all such different people from when they were younger. He guessed that was why they didn't know how to handle one another anymore.

Ash came to a stop, Pikachu's ears twitching up as he stopped munching on a berry. The raven-haired boy looked around, brow furrowing as he said, "There's two people over there. Not far."

"Think they're trouble?" Leaf asked him without actually looking.

"I..." He shrugged his shoulders. "Hard to tell. I can't read minds and they're just kind of hanging there. Maybe asleep. I dunno."

"Shouldn't you know that type of thing?"

Ash shot him an annoyed look, "I'm not om—omni—omni...uh..."

"Omnipotent," Leaf supplied.

"You mean omniscient," Gary cut in.

"I meant what I said. I meant all-powerful, not all-knowing."

"One of those words," he agreed, waving off the argument before it could really start.

"Whatever. Let's check it out, just in case," Gary muttered. He nodded for Ash to lead since he was the only one who actually knew where these two people were. They moved silently, not rustling any leaves or breaking any twigs.

It was still early in the morning, so the fact that the two men that they found were sleeping wasn't a surprise. What was a surprise was the fact that they wore distinctive uniforms and had two jeeps with them.

"Pokémon Rangers," Leaf muttered. "I wonder what they're doing here."

"Pi pikachu," the Pokémon shrugged his shoulders, sniffing the air a bit.

Gary didn't care about the fact that there were two Pokémon Rangers there. What he did care about was the fact that there were two jeeps there. His viridian eyes slid towards the two slumbering men, and he said, "We should take one of their jeeps."

"What?" Leaf almost ended up yelling, but managed to stifle her voice. "Are you insane? Why?"

"Look, whatever's going on in the world, it's not getting better. We could spend days, weeks trying to get to the Ilex Forest unless we take some more shortcuts. I'm sure Misty, Serena and Clemont thought of that too. There are two cars there."

"How do you plan on doing that?"

"First we look for keys, if not, I hot-wire it."

"No," Leaf spoke sternly. "We're trying to avoid getting caught and grand theft auto is a horrible way to do that."

The two of them stared at one another for a moment before Gary said, "I'm gonna do it."

"No you won't," she hissed, grabbing his arm as he tried to move forward.

"Yeah." He pulled his arm out of her grip. "I think I am."

"Ash," she whipped around to the third member of their party, startling him a bit, "tell him he's crazy."

"Gary, you're crazy," Ash repeated, an honesty to his voice that he didn't even try to hide.

"Okay but look," Gary motioned towards the jeeps. "If I hot-wire that car we can get down to at least Violet City faster. We might even be able to get to the Ilex Forest before we're fifty. And if you don't shut up you're going to wake up the Rangers."

"I'm surprised they're still asleep," Ash muttered under his breath, eyeing the two men.

"We are not stealing that truck."

"They have more than one, we're not stranding anyone."

"We are not stealing that truck."

"I vote yes." Gary pointed at himself. "You vote no." He pointed at her and then turned to Ash.

"What about you, Ashy-boy?"

"Obviously he says no." Leaf sounded so confident in her answer that both boys could practically see her crumble at Ash's answer

"Let's do it."

"Arceus-damn it Ash!" She punched his arm and sighed.

"What was that?"

The tree of them, as well as Pikachu, all looked up as both of the Pokémon Rangers jerked awake. Leaf growled a little bit, just knowing that the two boys were going to do whatever they had to do whether she helped out not. Deciding to make herself useful, she tossed a Pokéball up into the air and released her Venusaur, startling the men.

"What the—?"

Leaf put her hands together by her cheek and closed her eyes, mimicking sleep. Her Pokémon understood, unleashing Sleep Powder on the two startled Rangers. Both men collapsed back to the ground in a snoring pile.

"Thank you, sweetie," the only girl of the group cooed to her Pokémon as she recalled it. Her sweet demeanour turned into a serious one as she turned to face the boys. "Well, let's get going, this was your idea."

Gary and Ash exchanged nervous glances and scurried into the clearing in search of the keys to one of the jeeps. Neither of them wanted to get on her bad side.

Digging through the pockets of the two sleeping Pokémon Rangers, Gary found the keys and dangled them in the air. He then hurried to the jeeps to check which one he had the keys for while Ash, Leaf and Pikachu waited. He whooped as it started and looked back at his friends, "Let's go!"

"Don't they usually have GPS on them?" Leaf asked with a frown as she walked towards it.

"Yeah but it's pretty easy to turn off." Gary started poking at a touch screen on the dashboard for a moment. "I think it's already off. Whatever these two were doing, they weren't supposed to be doing it. So let's go."

"Fine." She sighed and paused for a moment. "Shotgun!" She dashed around to the front of the jeep.

"What?" Ash stared at her retreating form blankly, looking up at Pikachu, who shrugged.

"It means...never mind. I'm sitting in the front."

"Oh okay," Ash shrugged and opened the door to the back, climbing in without any hesitation, laying down instead of sitting up. He hadn't really slept for the couple hours that they stopped earlier, not wanting anything to sneak up on them. Before that, he spent the entire night awake, using his Aura to hold up a wall of rocks so that they wouldn't be crushed. At least in a car, they weren't going to get pounced on by angry Pokémon if he didn't sense them in time.

Pikachu patted his head as Gary started driving, and then jumped up onto Leaf's headrest. "Pi pikachu Chuchu?"

Leaf couldn't understand him, but she did know that Chuchu was his name for her. Guessing, she held out her arms and he jumped into them, looking out the windows with interest. She glanced

into the back seat, watching Ash shift his hat so it blocked the sun from his eyes more. "You okay?"

"Just tired."

"Well, with this we'll be able to get there today," Gary said. "Rather than walking the whole way."

"I just didn't want to steal anything," she glowered at him. She would have crossed her arms if it wasn't for Pikachu sitting in her lap. Instead, she scratched his head, earning a 'chaa' of approval. "If someone finds out about this the first thing they're going to ask is if it was my idea."

Ash pushed the peak of his cap up a bit to glance at her. "It wasn't though. It was Gary's."

"Yeah but that's not what the rumours will say. Golden boy here will be the victim of my genetically criminal ways and your natural stupidity," Leaf said bluntly.

Ash's shoulders slumped a little, because he knew that she wasn't calling him stupid, but it was what the people back home would say. Pallet Town might have been an amazing place to grow up side-by-side with Pokémon, but it was so small. There were vast fields and forests, and it wasn't that far to travel to a beautiful beach. It was part of the reason that Professor Oak set decided to stay there and set up his lab. The downside to small towns though was that rumours spread fast, and mistakes were rarely ever forgotten.

Gary bit his lip as the same realization came to him. Maybe all the hurt from the past wasn't gone yet.

"If anyone finds out after this, I'll tell them it was me," he spoke up after a moment. He kept his eyes focused on where he was driving since there wasn't actually any roads. "You're not your mother. And Ash, you're not as stupid as some people think." The boy in the back nodded his head in acknowledgement before shifting onto his side so that he was facing away from them.

"Yeah, well apparently I don't know my mom that well," her voice was so bitter that it was impossible to ignore. "I always knew she was a part of Master Red and your father's adventure. She got shunned for the credit, or maybe she was the one who did the things that neither of them would. Who knows. But she was quick to jump into action mode. Did you see her back home? She looked so alive again. Like her reason for living came back." Pikachu nuzzled his face into her stomach, and she hugged the Pokémon close, enjoying the warmth he provided.

In the rear-view mirror, Gary saw Ash shift, looking around at Leaf for a moment. He didn't say anything and turned back soon enough. The brunet didn't know if his friend picked up on what Leaf wasn't saying, but it made his hands clench the wheel a little tighter.

Green's reason for living was the adventure, not Leaf.

...

Step by step, Misty led the way through the Ilex Forest. Not a soul stopped them in Azalea Town, and they were in familiar territory now so she knew exactly where they were going. Ria had fallen back, walking by Serena, who refused another human crutch. The Lucario just wanted to make sure that she didn't fall, but had to admit that she admired her willingness to keep pushing forward.

Clemont came up at the back of the group so he could keep an eye on Serena, and because he was exhausted. The train ride turned their trip into a fraction of what it could have been, but the Ilex Forest was thick and dense. Even more so than the ones closer to Blackthorn. He tripped and stumbled every few feet and didn't want anyone else to notice. Well, anyone aside from Ria, who

kept looking back at him.

Misty came to an abrupt stop, taking a deep breath. "We're here."

Serena ran forward, ignoring the twinge in her leg and coming to a stop beside Misty, Ria jumping to the blonde's side in case she fell. Clemont hurried to the redhead's other side, and stared.

Rising from the ground was a stone shrine. It was simple, raised up on a stone platform, but at the same time, under the moss, he could still make out small but worn intricate details.

"What are we looking for here?" Serena asked. "What does Arceus want?"

"Something only Ash can get, so we'll have to wait for them." Misty walked forward, cautiously moving around the object. She hesitantly climbed up and opened the small doors that were in it, but there was nothing inside. "I don't...understand though. There's nothing here."

"There is," Ria spoke up, pointing at the shrine. "It's there, just where you were looking, but it's protected."

"Protected so not even Arceus himself can get it," Clemont muttered and shook his head. "Well, I guess we can sit down, get some food while we're here."

"In the tree line," Misty ordered, hopping down from the stone platform. "We're not Ash, we're not sure how things are going to go even when he is here." She crossed her arms in front of her and looked over her shoulder warily. "I don't like being too close to Celebi's shrine. Or any legendary pokémon for that matter."

The two Kalanese natives looked at one another before Clemont nodded his head in agreement.

"Good point. We don't know how long we'll be here, so we should stay out of sight." They shuffled out of sight, because there was nothing they could do but wait.

...

Hours later, Misty and Serena were both sleeping on the soft grass of the forest while Clemont kept watch. It was still daytime, but they had nothing else to do and catching up on sleep was a great idea for everyone involved. He himself had dozed off earlier too, but ended up waking up with a jerk when Ria moved around the camp.

"You must be tired," he said to the Pokémon as he took his glasses off. He breathed on them and rubbed them against his yellow and white striped shirt. "Maybe you should get some sleep?"

"I'll rest when I can go back into my Pokéball." It was still eerie to Clemont that she could talk. Ash rotated his Pokémon around a lot, Pikachu being the only constant. Ria was there pretty frequently too, and it was strange to think that the entire time she could use telepathy to speak to them.

"I guess, I just—" Clemont cut himself off as the sound of an engine reached his ears. Ria tensed up, and he shot to his feet, going to Serena and shaking her shoulder first.

"Clemont? What?" He ignored her, moving to Misty next. She groaned and rolled over, taking a half-hearted swing at him that he was actually able to dodge.

"Get up," he said, the urgency in his voice causing both teenage girls to wake up more. "There's something coming."

Ria stood tensely at the edge of the tree line, eyes narrowed as a jeep drove over some bushes, swerving into view. The second that it appeared, she perked up, dropping her defensive stance even as it spun to a stop, ripping up the grass in the process.

The Lucario jumped forward just as the passenger door flew open. The three Pokémon trainers could only watch with pure confusion as Leaf flung out of it onto the grass, gripping it tightly. "Oh god, I'm alive!"

"You were the one who said hurry up!" Gary yelled as he got out of the other side. "So I hurried up!"

She just groaned and Pikachu hopped out after her, patting the top of her head before his ears twitched. A big smile appeared on his face as he caught sight of Ria and waved. "Pikapika!" Ria bounced over quite happily, and Pikachu jumped up onto her shoulder, humming in happiness.

"Ria?" The back door opened and Ash stumbled out, stretching his legs. He laughed as the Pokémon practically tackled him in a hug. "Woah, watch the spikes! Wait, is everyone else here?"

Breaking out of their stunned stupors, Misty, Serena and Clemont came into the clearing. Ash looked towards them, a wide smile stretching across his face as he laughed in relief. He was expecting to have to wait for them for who knows how long but somehow they got there first. He reached his friends from Kalos first, pulling them into a group hug that made both of them laugh.

Leaf looked up as red boots appeared in front of her, and stared helplessly at Misty, who held out a hand with amusement. She took it and the redhead pulled her up. "Where'd you get a jeep?"

"Gary stole it," she answered. "How'd you get here so fast?"

"Put on disguises and hopped a train." Misty didn't even question the fact that Gary stole a car.

Leaf shook her head a bit and then glanced towards Serena as she and Clemont took a few steps away from Ash. "Oh wow, what did you do to your leg? And why didn't Ria heal it?" The Pokémon in question slumped down a bit.

"Fell when we got attacked by Ursaring," she shrugged her thin shoulders. "Ria did her best."

"Well, come over here, I've got some ointment that will help it more." Shrugging again, Serena walked over to Leaf. The other teenager started digging through her backpack.

"This was actually a pretty good idea," Clemont said as he approached Gary, glancing at the jeep. "Where'd you find it?"

"Some Pokémon Rangers who were slacking on the job had two. We put them to sleep and borrowed one." Gary nodded his head at his own words. "Misty said you guys got here by train?"

"Yeah. Serena hurt her leg and we needed to move faster, so I suggested it and she came up with the idea for disguises." Uncomfortable disguises, but they worked.

"Ah, 'cause Serena needed it, huh?" At first, the teasing tone in Gary's voice startled Clemont. His face turned red and he looked away, causing the other boy to chuckle.

"Jerk," Misty gently smacked Ash's shoulder. "Making me freak out and think you were dead."

"Sorry," he chuckled, his eyes sliding back down to Ria, who was slumping a bit against him.

"You're really tired. When was the last time you slept?" She shook her head and blinked up at him.

Misty was surprised to see how exhausted the Pokémon was, and realized that she must have been putting on a strong front for them.

"Thank you for helping us so much," Misty said, fixing her bow a bit. "We wouldn't be here without you."

Ria smiled and then looked at Ash with hopeful eyes. He laughed and Pikachu, who had silently been sitting on her shoulder. He jumped down onto the ground and smiled at her encouragingly. "Get some rest, you did awesome." She vanished back into her Pokéball, ready for a good, long nap.

Ash smiled at the Pokéball and shrunk it down before clipping it to his belt. "So how did you—?" Misty cut him off by pulling him forward, pressing her lips against his.

He was startled, but melted into the kiss, his hands going to her waist, tugging her closer as he closed his eyes.

They broke apart when a cry echoed through the air. Misty shifted closer to him as she turned to face the shrine, and he moved his hands from her waist to her shoulders. Without any sort of warning, the air in front of the shrine ripped open, a portal of bright light appearing. A moment later, a small, green creature flew out, the tear vanishing as it did. She spun around for a moment, stretching her small legs before looking at them and smiling broadly. "Bi bi!"

"Celebi," Ash breathed out.

They had finally found what they were looking for.

Chapter End Notes

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The First Treasure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



"What does it want?" Serena asked, taking a step back from the friendly-looking Pokémon.

"She's what we're here to find, sort of," Ash let go of Misty and took a few steps forward. The girl grabbed his hand, eyes pleading with him to be careful. He smiled and pulled his hand from hers before turning around and walking forward. "Hi Celebi. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

She nodded her head, cooing happily as she flew around him.

"I dunno if you know, but Arceus wants my help with something," the teenager explained, well aware that all of his friends were tense and keeping a very close eye on the Pokémon. "I'm not sure if you know what's going on or if it even matters, but Team Rocket is causing a lot of trouble and Arceus seems to think it's going to get worse. He wants me to find something for him so he can stop it."

Her shoulders slumped a bit and she nodded her head. "I know. Come up to the shrine." They were all a bit startled to hear the telepathy, since she hadn't used it any other time they met before. The others might have been wary, but Ash felt absolutely no ill-will coming from the Pokémon and didn't hesitate to follow her up. He watched with interest as she flew around the shrine a couple times and then pointed at the small, stone doors. Reaching forward, he pried them open, inhaling sharply. Just like Arceus had shown him in his dream, there was an all too familiar orb, even if he had never seen this specific one before.

Carefully reaching out, Ash took the orb into his hand and stared at it. It was a strange colour, torn between a dull green and beige, light appearing in the middle of it. He quickly retreated back away from the shrine, turning the orb over in his hands. Misty leaned against him as he came back to her and gasped. "That looks just like..."

"The treasures on Shamouti Island," he confirmed with a nod of his head. "There are 18 of them, and Arceus needs all of them."

"That's the Normal Orb," Celebi spoke up. "I was chosen to guard it because – well – Arceus can't

very well guard something that might have to be guarded from himself. This is the only one in Johto."

Ash's head snapped up. "What?" His friends echoed this sentiment.

She shrugged. "We weren't going to leave them all in one place." Flying around Ash quickly she said, "If someone but the Chosen One takes them, or you're not around them in about 24 hours time, they'll vanish back to the shrines they came from. We also can't remove them." She crossed her arms. "Some of the others won't be as welcoming as I am. They'll fight to protect the treasure."

"Of course they will," Misty muttered bitterly, her fingernails digging into Ash's skin on the arm that she was holding. "You're destroying cities and killing people as it is."

Celebi frowned and slumped at the mention of that. "It's not what it seems. Something really, really bad is going to happen and the enemy is...well it's everywhere and not what you think. We can try to stop it, your Pokémon trainers can try to stop it, but it won't matter. Arceus is the only one who can truly end what's going to come."

"You can travel through time," Gary said suddenly. "Can't you tell us what's going to come?"

"You've travelled through time," she noted, crossing her tiny arms in front of her. "You know that I can't change anything."

Gary opened his mouth to reply, but found that he couldn't. Images of liquid metal made from the remains of steel-type Pokémon rushed through his mind, something that he would never quite forget no matter how many years went by. He mirrored Celebi's pose and nodded his head.

"So these things, if I get them all and give them to Arceus, he'll be able to use them to stop whatever's happening?" Ash clarified.

"Yes," Celebi answered simply. "When they're brought together at the place where everything began, Arceus will be unstoppable."

"Great. Where are the other ones?"

"No idea." They all groaned. "What? It's not like we shared the details! But if I had to guess...go to the place where the land and sea clash. You'll find the way to go from there!"

"The land and sea...wait!" Ash reached forward and tried to grab Celebi, but the Pokémon already flew back inside of the glowing rift that appeared in the air once again. "What does that mean?"

Celebi turned around and stared at him for a moment with sad blue eyes. "Please don't give up, no matter what you find along the way. You're the only one that can save us." Then the portal vanished and she was gone.

The whole group was silent for a moment, just staring blankly where Celebi had vanished. Leaf was the first to move, putting her hands on her hips. "That's it? We came all this way for a small lecture and a Christmas ornament?"

"Arceus said that they were the essence of Pokémon types, whatever that means," Ash said with a shrug.

Serena came up to his other side and stared at it curiously. "Could I...?" She trailed off, holding her hand out hesitantly. Ash instantly dropped the orb into her hand, and much to both their surprise, it stopped glowing.

"Pi?" Pikachu tilted his head, looking at the orb curiously before pointing at Ash again. "Pikapi pika cha!"

Ash took the orb back, and it once again lit up. "Huh. Guess it'll only work for me." Those words sunk in as the implications behind them really hit him. He really was the only one that these orbs would respond to. Celebi said that they would vanish if they weren't with him, and that wasn't a risk that he was willing to take.

A sinking feeling hit him, the same one that always came to him when something was going to go horribly wrong and he couldn't stop it. Sighing, Ash clutched the orb tighter and looked up. "You guys don't have to come with me."

The other five stared back at him with almost identical incredulous expressions. Misty smacked his arm lightly. "Stupid. I'm not letting you go alone. You won't even make it out of the Ilex Forest without getting yourself killed."

"Do you even know where to go?" Serena asked, putting her hands on her hips and raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Where the land and sea clash!"

"And where is that?"

"Uhh..." Ash stared at her blankly. "Um...the beach?" They all groaned with exasperation. "What? It's a good guess!"

"And there are beaches everywhere in the world," Leaf deadpanned.

"Hoenn," Gary interrupted before Ash could argue back. "She meant Hoenn since that's where the legends of Kyogre and Groudon are most prominent." He stared at his childhood friend with a firm expression. "You might be the only one that can help Arceus, but you can't do it alone."

"How would you get to Hoenn?" Leaf added.

Ash took a step back, crossing his arms. Pikachu looked up at his trainer, ears twitching a bit before he moved closer to Ash's side, mimicking his pose with a stern expression. The raven-haired boy glowered at them. "I'm not completely stupid! I know, it's hard to imagine, right?"

"Ash, it's just...this is important and that orb..."

"What? You wanna steal it or something?" The words were ridiculous and didn't really make sense, but Ash still felt bad. Leaf glared at him, instantly picking up on the dig that was meant to be a bit hurtful. The teenage boy wanted to apologize, but he wasn't going to back down.

"Stop it!" Serena cried out, taking a few steps forward so she was between Ash and Leaf.

"Nobody's calling you stupid, Ash."

"Maybe I am," Leaf snapped angrily as she moved towards Ash without warning. Serena's threw her arms out, keeping the two seething teenagers away from one another. Gary shifted a bit closer, ready to haul Leaf away if she lashed out. Misty was already holding onto the back of Ash's shirt and wouldn't hesitate to yank him back if his rare temper got the best of him.

"Olivine City." If anyone would have stumbled upon them that moment, they probably wouldn't have known what to make of the scene. A teenage boy and girl facing off with a smaller blonde in between them, keeping them apart, while another teenage boy and girl were ready to pull them

apart if need be. All the while, the last boy was standing away from them, looking at a paper map that he had pulled out the second Hoenn was mentioned. It was even stranger when the other five all looked over at Clemont, still in the same positions. Realizing that they were all staring, his face turned pink. "Ah—I just—if we need to go to Hoenn we probably need to go by boat. So Olivine City is the best place to go. We can use the jeep to get close and then..." He shrugged.

"We'll probably have to sneak on," Misty sighed. "Guess we're going to be breaking a lot of laws to save the world, huh?"

Ash took a few steps back and sighed, his whole posture relaxing. "You guys really want to come?"

"Of course we do," Serena answered for all of them, clenching her hand into a fist. "We're all going to work together to stop Team Rocket because that's what friends do, right?"

"Yeah." He smiled and nodded his head before his brown eyes slid to Leaf and he frowned. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Her shoulders slumped. "It's okay. I shouldn't have called you stupid." Her pale brown eyes narrowed a bit. "Do you remember how we realized just how lucky it was that I was in Sinnoh, that I was with you guys when Shaymin poisoned Misty? I knew what to do, like I was supposed to be there." He nodded his head, wincing at the memory. "You always follow your gut, and that's what I'm doing right now. I have the feeling we all need to be there."

"I do too," Ash agreed grimly. "And that's exactly why I'm worried."

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Bonnie managed to stay silent as she was walking down the hall, checking behind her every once in a while to make sure she wasn't being followed. She pressed herself against a wall, and moved carefully towards a small room. She twisted the doorknob when another voice made her jump.

"What are you doing?"

She whipped around, staring at Max with wide blue eyes. She looked left and right quickly before grabbing his arm and hauling him into the room along with her, closing the door quickly. In turn, Max almost yelped with surprise, but she slammed her palm over his mouth. "Shh. You're going to get me caught!"

"Caught?" Max managed to mumble. "Caught doing what? And let go of me." He was a bit surprised, because this younger, smaller girl was strong.

"Only if you be quiet," Bonnie hissed, lifting her hand as he nodded his head, deciding to humour her. "Aren't you curious about what's going on?"

"Well yeah," he admitted with a nod of his head, "but I—."

"Shh," she raised her hand again and he held up his own as a sign of defeat. "They're not going to tell either of us what's going on. So either come with me and find out, or go away and don't tell anyone what I'm doing."

Max stared at her oddly, weighing the pros and cons in his mind. Really, the worst case scenario was that they'd get caught, taken back to their rooms, and scolded. The curiosity that was gnawing at him, on the other hand, would drive him insane eventually. "Alright. Where were you going?"

"Up here," Bonnie climbed up onto a dresser. "Dedenne." Max blinked with surprise as the grate on

the wall above them suddenly moved and popped off. She caught it and set it down by her feet as Dedenne smiled at her cheerfully. Casting a glance over her shoulder she said, "I can't take it off from this side. There's a grate in the other room that's broken so Dedenne can squeeze in. She comes over and pops this one off for me."

"The air vents?" That seemed kind of cliché.

"Yup." She hauled herself up into the hole in the wall. "Coming? Or are you scared?"

The young boy bristled at the thought. "I'm not scared." He climbed up onto the dresser after her, hauling himself into the vent. "Do you know where to go?"

"Yeah. Lead the way, Dedenne."

Slowly and quietly, the small group of three made their way through the air vents until Dedenne stopped. In the small space, Bonnie shifted around so that she was stretched out the opposite way Max was and motioned towards the grate beside her. He moved forward and looked down, a bit surprised to see that there was a room full of people below them. He recognized a few of them like Lance, Brock, Tracey, Bonnie's father, the gym leader Clair, the other woman that people called Green and a few others that seemed relatively familiar.

Lance was standing up in front of everyone else, pointing to a projected image behind him of the fissure that was created between Kanto and Johto. "...And the reports confirm that it was Regigigas. The fissure goes all the way from the base of Mt. Silver to the ocean. This caused it to fill up with sea water, making it very treacherous if anyone tries to cross it. Not to mention Team Rocket is patrolling most of the border. Tracey?"

The green-haired young man got up, looking rather nervous with all of the eyes on him. Still, he managed to point to parts of the images. "I'm a Pokémon Watcher, and assistant to Professor Oak. I was asked to analyze all of the still photos and the video to pick out anything strange. There were pockets of areas that looked like they weren't under surveillance or observation. I found camouflaged Rockets in every single one of them." That made a couple of people mumble as Tracey sat back down.

"How many people do they have to pull that off?" Meyer asked, sounding perplexed.

Lance sighed and looked entirely too tired, running a hand through his dark pink hair.

"Team Rocket, and most of the other regional teams, are predatory. Unfortunately, despite Master Red trying to make changes in all cities and towns in Kanto and Johto, only Pallet Town is strict on letting young children leave home. Almost everyone else, anyone can just go and leave the April after they turn 10. At the very most there's tests that everyone can take and if they pass they can go. This makes for a lot of confused and overwhelmed children." He shook his head. "Think about how few end up in tournaments or grand festivals. Sure, most end up home, but what Team Rocket does is act as a home for them, a place with arms wide open for everyone to go to. They lure in unsure kids. They lure in lost teenagers or young adults who are rebelling or looking for fun. That's where they're getting their numbers. Of course, they had a lot of older members within the League, the G-Men and the government in general."

Bonnie and Max exchanged surprised looks because neither one of them had ever thought of that before. It made a lot of sense to Max though. He didn't have a group that he travelled with and it was easy to feel lost and alone sometimes.

"How?" One of the women in the room voiced the question that many of them seemed to be

thinking.

Lance thought about this for a moment. "Many of you know the story about how Red, once he became the Kanto Champion, made it his mission to take down Team Rocket. Along with Blue, former Viridian City Gym Leader, he was directly responsible for Team Rocket's fall years ago. Green here," he nodded at Leaf's mother, "was heavily involved as well. There were others, but they shed their past identities to protect themselves and their families. I was involved once I became the Johto Champion as well. The campaign led to the arrest of a woman that we knew for a very long time as only Madam Rocket. She's still quite resilient in her old age. Thanks to Giovanni's recent revelations, we've finally concluded that she is Sylvia Rocketti."

"No one got any answers in all these years?" A man asked skeptically. "Why not force it out of her?"

"We don't condone torture," Lance replied dryly. "We always knew that there were small factions of Team Rocket running again, but we didn't realize how big it actually was. Look what that small oversight cost us. We will not be caught off guard like that again." They were all silent. "Green, you were involved last time longer than I was, anything to add for now?"

"Don't get cocky," she said after a moment. "Wear disguises, use fake names, don't be a hero. Heroes lose."

"That's morbid," Brock muttered, a little louder than he meant to.

Green stared at him with stern eyes. "Did you know that Red had a girlfriend? A Cerulean City Gym Leader, Misty Waterflower." Brock and Tracey exchanged odd looks. "Not the one you know, her aunt that she was named after. She didn't mention her?" The woman looked both smug and grim. "Not surprising. It's not something people talk about often." Green turned away, staring at the image of the Kanto-Johto border. "She was found floating face down in her own pool. People would have thought it was an accident if it wasn't for the fact that her Pokémon were slaughtered too. She was 17. Same age as your friend Misty is now, right? It was a huge tragedy at the time. What few other people know is that someone called Red and taunted him about her just before that. He was the one that found her because he ran to help." She turned around to face them again, expression stern and harsh. "That's the type of people we're dealing with, who won't hesitate to go after someone you love no matter how old they are."

"The last major crime like that with Team Rocket as the suspects happened about ten years ago," Lance added, cutting through the tense silence. "When Blue, or rather, John Oak and his wife, Hillary, along with his sister Daisy, were killed." Green looked down at the floor at that as Lance continued. "Until now that is."

"The hit list," Clair said with a nod. "What do we know about that?"

Lance revealed a remote, clicking it to change the image to a clear list of names, most of them highlighted red. "What we know is that everyone except for two people that were taken are listed as dead. Whether this is true or not remains to be seen, but we were never supposed to see this list so we can assume it's true."

Max inhaled sharply when he recognized the name Kidd Summers on the list. Many others were familiar, but that was the one that stood out the most to him.

"What we know is that no Champions, Frontier Brains, Elite Four members, Gym Leaders, highly prominent Professors or Coordinators were taken. We believe that this is simply due to high publicity. Most of the people that were taken happened without anyone noticing. Unfortunately,

this also means that Master Red was a target. I think he would have been an exception even if he came down off of that stupid mountain more than he did. Without him we have no central leadership, it's harder to work across regions and we have to assume that's intentional. Outside of him, the hit list was comprised of Masters, researchers, coordinators, rangers, trainers and others that showed a lot of promise without being directly in the spotlight. That or they were highly specialized in something. Even the trainers that were considered the lowest priority are highly skilled. We were able to get word out to the other Champions, who managed to get custody of the ones that weren't taken yet." Lance paused and let that sink in. "As far as we know, Master Red is still alive. It would be stupid to kill him. The only other person to survive this massacre is Ash Ketchum. Though perhaps we can count his mother, Misty Waterflower and your daughter as well." He nodded at Meyer, whose face went pale.

"Just one person?" Someone asked with disbelief. "And a random kid at that?"

"Ash Ketchum is far from a random kid. I'm not surprised he was on that list at all. We've kept his name and the names of his friends off of any official documents that weren't sealed away." Lance nodded at Brock and Tracey, though for a second, Max and Bonnie both would have sworn his eyes flickered to them. "He's helped in operations involving the G-Men and taking down regional teams before, though few people would know that because we protected the kids' identities, and he's becoming a fairly powerful and renowned trainer in his own right. Always getting in someone's way for good reasons. That's the type of person that Team Rocket doesn't want getting in their way of their plan. They targeted the powerful trainers who would never turn to their side."

That made a lot of sense to Bonnie, who ignored the heavy silence that fell over the room. Ash would never help the bad guys and would fight tooth and nail to stop their plans. He was out doing that very thing right now.

"Has there been any news about the Kanto Prime Minister?" Brock asked suddenly, changing the topic.

"The Prime Minister of Johto is completely on our side, but Kanto?" Lance shook his head. "He's playing it safe. He's going to give in to Giovanni and let things ride smoothly. He'll protect the people, but he's also a coward. Giovanni has a grudge against the Pokémon league and we all know it. Team Rocket seems to have focused on Kanto rather than both Kanto and Johto. That could be due to numbers."

"It could be a strategy," one of the men suggested. "Johto's defended well, but Kanto is a mess where the league is considered. People might think like we abandoned them."

The Champion stared at them with harsh eyes. "Unfortunately, we were very unprepared for this. They outnumber us right now, and the other regions aren't offering up much in the way of help. This whole thing was highly planned and organized."

"So what can we do to help Kanto?" Tracey wondered.

Lance turned and looked. "We have sporadic communication with people that are on our side in Kanto but are staying low for now. Gym Leaders, Frontier Brains and others. They're silently working to keep people who might make themselves targets safe. For now though, we do nothing."

Everyone stared at one another nervously, and Max shifted a bit. Bonnie looked at him and he motioned behind him, slowly backing up and turning around. She wanted to argue but still followed him out of the air vents and back into the storage room. "Why did we leave?"

"I don't think we need to hear anything else," he admitted with a grimace. "They said enough to

know that it's really bad."

"What is? Everything that's happening?" Bonnie didn't quite understand and she didn't like not understanding.

Max shook his head sadly. "They said enough to know that they already lost Kanto."

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"Okay, so we need to establish some road rules," Gary spoke up from the driver's seat, his viridian eyes glancing at the rearview mirror to the back seat where Ash, Misty, Serena and Clemont were all shoved together. It took them a while to actually leave the shrine, deciding to eat and share stories of their individual adventures. After that, Leaf was quick to claim her spot in the front seat again and the other four figured out why pretty quickly, since it was a tight squeeze in the back.

Needless to say, Pikachu once again chose to sit with Leaf instead of his trainer.

"Road rules?" Ash repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"You heard me. Rule one. The strongest bladder determines when we stop so be ready to hold it. We're going to be cutting through the forests instead of following the road so we'll be able to cut out travel time pretty much in half, maybe more. Especially if we don't stop every half an hour."

"Anything else, car dictator?" Leaf asked sarcastically, prompting a snicker from Pikachu.

"Yeah. No side-seat driving or shitty music."

"My music is fantastic," she replied with a shrug. "And I'm a better driver than you. The only reason you're driving is because you have a better idea of where to go."

"I could drive," Misty pointed out.

"Yeah, no," Gary said sarcastically as he looked up the mirror again quickly. "We all know you only got your license because you terrified the examiner. And Ash doesn't have his so that leaves the two of us up here."

"I can drive if I have to though," Ash added in an off-handed way, like he wasn't really interested in it. "I know how, I just never did the test."

"Yeah, 'cause we want an unlicensed driver at the wheel if we get pulled over."

"We're going to be going through the woods and trails in a stolen jeep," Serena deadpanned. "I don't think that's what we should worry about."

Leaf pointed over her shoulder at her. "She's got a point."

"Whatever," Gary waved his hand as he steered the jeep. "There's still the most important rule. No frick-frack in the back seat, got it?"

Everyone fell silent and just stared at him. Clemont and Serena both exchanged odd looks, like they thought Gary had completely lost his mind, while Ash just shook his head with amusement. Misty leaned forward a bit, her eyes narrowed and confrontational. "I'll have you know, Gary Oak, that if I want to have a freaking back-seat orgy, I will and you won't be able to do anything about it. You're also not invited."

"Am I?" Leaf asked, turning to face her and wiggling her eyebrows ridiculously.

"Of course. It wouldn't be the same otherwise." The redhead's tone was suggestive as she dramatically battered her eyes.

"Oh my Mew," Serena muttered. It actually was funny, but at the same time still so embarrassing. She glanced at Clemont to see his reaction and he looked absolutely mortified. A quick glance in the other direction found Ash shaking his head, looking like he was struggling to keep in his laughter.

"Your face is so red," Leaf said as she looked at Clemont, who was sitting directly behind her. A positively wicked smile crossed her features as she looked at Misty. "I get him first." The brunette was taken aback by the positively fierce glare she earned from Serena, and their expressions were enough to make Misty snort. Her snort set Ash off and he started laughing so hard that there were tears rolling down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Clemont," the girl in the front seat said through her own peals of laughter. "I was just teasing," She looked at Serena specifically. "Teasing, I promise."

"I'm surrounded by lunatics," Gary groaned. "Hey Clemont, want to switch seats with Leaf and come up to the sane part of the car?"

"Tempting," he said with a sigh, though the blond was smiling now. He knew that Leaf hadn't meant anything by it, no one did, but it was still a bit embarrassing since he wasn't used to people talking like that.

The laughter died down as everyone settled back into their seats for the drive, listening to the music on the radio. In the front, Gary was focusing on the road, Pikachu was asleep on Leaf's lap while the girl looked through a manual that she found in the glove compartment.

In the back, Ash shifted, putting his arm over Misty's shoulders instead of tucked against his side awkwardly in the cramped space. She just shifted closer, resting her head against his shoulder. Serena looked over at the movement, and a small smile appeared on her face as she looked away. Clemont glanced at her with worry, but she just smiled at him as she brought out a book from her bag.

Clemont watched her for a moment before pulling out his own sketchbook that he kept on him and deciding to work out some of the problems in the schematics he was making. They had the time for it, since it would take a while to get to Olivine City.

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Ash was standing at the edge of a very tall cliff, looking down at the trees far below, the wind ruffling his hair and baggy blue vest. He heard rapid footsteps coming up behind him and turned around, frowning when he saw Misty, hair tied in her high, side-ponytail, wearing her red shirt, yellow shorts and yellow buttoned top over. She looked terrified.

"Misty, what happened?"

"They're gone," she said in a shaky voice, refusing to look up. "All of them. Those things got them. I tried to help Brock but his hand slipped away." She shook her head wildly. "How could I let his hand slip away?"

"What? What are you—?" The ground shook underneath their feet, suddenly cracking open. Ash stumbled back, reaching out towards Misty, who was already out of sight. He landed, but it wasn't on the ground, in water or anything like that. It was like landing in a massive pool of orange slime.

It suddenly started moving, twisting around him and trying to draw him in farther no matter how much he struggled. A yell caught his attention, and he looked up to see Max and Brock being dragged inside of the strange shapes. He tried to help, but he just got dragged away.

Ash struggled, trying to tug himself away, and he finally succeeded, splashing through a downpour of icy water. There was a strange thing in front of him that looked like someone could climb inside. Quickly realizing it was an emergency pod, Ash looked around, taking in the intricate interior of the Sea Temple.

Movement caught his attention and he looked beside him, a bit startled to see May holding Manaphy. Remembering what happened back then, he grabbed her arm to urge her towards the capsule, but Manaphy fought against them, jumping away and staring with blank, haunting eyes. The water rushed around them, and Ash tried to get a hold of May, but her fingers slipped through his just as the water surrounded them.

He was thrown up into the air, landing haphazardly on a ledge, only to be yanked forward. Looking up, Ash caught Dawn's terrified expression as she tried to say something to him. He couldn't hear anything though, not even as she pointed to something behind them. Ash followed her gaze, gasping when he realized that the stairs below them were vanishing with a shower of pink sparks. They both started running, but Dawn slipped. Ash turned around, trying to reach for her hand to pull her up, but he was too late and could only watch as she fell.

Ash half expected to see Leaf fall off of one of the precarious cliffs in the Reverse World, or maybe being forced to hold Misty in his arms as Shaymin's poison got the best of her. Instead, when he opened his eyes this time, he was on a ruined staircase, his arms spread in either direction.

The boy's heart jumped to his throat. Down the stairs, Arceus was struggling against a downpour of Silver Water, and up the stairs, Damos was fighting against Marcus. He breathed in and out heavily, trying to calm himself down but the strain on his arms was just too much, he couldn't hold them both. The same as before, he reluctantly stopped supporting the platform that Damos was on, and it crumbled away.

Ash looked up, and as he did, a horrified cry escaped his lips. It wasn't Damos on the platform anymore. It was all his friends. Brock, Tracey, Bonnie, Max, Clemont, Serena, Iris, Cilan, Gary, Dawn, Leaf, May, Misty. They were all falling as the floor let go beneath them. Ash jerked his arms around to cry and stop their fall, but it was too late, all he could do was watch. At the same time a horrifying sound echoed from down the stairs.

Looking back down, he realized with horror what he had done. In choosing to save Arceus, he let his friends fall. In choosing to try and save them, he let the Silver Water pour down onto Arceus, who fell into the liquid, unmoving.

Everything went black, and he was the only thing left there. The only thing left standing. Giant, bright red eyes suddenly opened in front of him, and an eerie voice whispered, "You are going to fail, and you are going to lose everything and everyone you love in the process."

"Ash!"

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The Pokémon trainer gasped violently as he was jerked out of his sleep, coughing like something had been choking him. He leaned forward in the cramped back seat of the jeep and breathed in and out rapidly.

"Ash?" The same voice that broke him out of his nightmare, Misty's voice, reached out to him. He looked up, meeting her worried green eyes. Beyond her, Serena and Clemont were both staring at him stunned expressions. Gary and Leaf were nowhere to be seen. "Shh, it's okay. It's okay." Misty pressed her lips against his sweaty forehead. "Just breathe." She ran her hand up and down his back. "Breathe."

Ash hadn't really realized that he was nearly hyperventilating until he actually started to calm down. After a moment of silence he said, "I'm okay."

"That must have been one hell of a nightmare," Misty muttered, her arm still around him, cheek pressed against the top of his head.

"I've never seen you thrash around like that before," Clemont spoke up after a moment, though he sounded almost like he wasn't sure if he should talk at all. He was the one to share a tent and rooms with Ash during their travels, and knew that his friend suffered from nightmares more frequently than most people would guess, but he had never seen him lash out that much.

"Thrash...did I hit someone?" Almost instantly, Ash was completely alert and alarmed. He sat up straight, and Misty moved to give him more room. Clemont was too far for him to hit, but Misty and possibly Serena were within his reach.

"No. I mean, you almost managed to smack me and Serena, but don't worry, I made sure you couldn't." There was such certainty in her tone that he wouldn't have been able to hurt them that he couldn't really argue. Ash was just glad that he hadn't lashed out with his Aura or anything like that. "So, wanna talk about it?"

"It...was just twisted memories of things that happened before. Not one of those dreams," the raven-haired teenager clarified.

"Those dreams?" Serena repeated, stressing the word the same way he did.

"Sometimes I have dreams, like little clips of something that's going to happen, like a warning," Ash explained warily. "They usually don't make sense at the time. This one didn't feel like those. It just felt like a nightmare."

"You sure?" Misty asked and he nodded his head. This wasn't something he was trying to hide, it genuinely felt like a horrible nightmare with twists of the bad things that happened in the past with something that he truly dreaded happening.

Deciding that he wanted to shrug aside his dream, he focused on something that should have been more obvious before, but he was only picking up on it now. "Where's Pikachu?"

"He went with Leaf and Gary," Clemont explained. "They're scoping out the docks to see if there's a boat we can sneak onto."

"We're here already?" Ash looked around, taking in their surroundings for the first time. He was a bit surprised to see that they were in a dark parking lot, surrounded by other cars of various shapes and sizes. What better place to hide a jeep that they didn't want anyone paying attention to?

"Yeah, we're really close to the docks, so once they find something we can go," Serena answered, nodding towards the walkie-talkie that Clemont had in his hand. "We don't want to end up on the wrong boat or something."

"We'd probably end up all the way in Orre or something." Misty rolled her eyes at her own words.

Almost like they'd been summoned, the walkie-talkie came to life with a crackle, startling all four of them. "You guys there?" It was Gary on the other end, sounding like he was whispering.

"Yeah, we're all listening," Clemont replied, glancing around at everyone else as if making sure that they were all paying attention.

"Good. Get your stuff and get down here. We found a cargo ship heading towards Hoenn. They're supposed to be leaving in a few hours, but they may take off earlier. I'll explain when you get here. We should get on as soon as possible."

"Alright. Is Pikachu okay?" Ash asked them.

"Of course he is," Leaf replied, Pikachu's voice echoing the sentiment in the background. "He was just tired of hearing your snores. Hurry up."

"We'll be there soon." They all looked at one another before glancing out the windows to make sure that no one was looking their way. Moving quickly, they got out of the car and grabbed their bags along with the ones that Gary and Leaf had left behind.

It took a few minutes for them to actually sneak to the docks. Security was surprisingly high, and there were quite a few people around. The air was tense and everyone seemed nervous for some reason or another. It put all of them on edge.

"How do we find them?" Clemont wondered as he looked around one of the massive freight containers.

"I got this," Ash winked at him before kneeling down, pressing his palm to the ground and closing his eyes. He was silent for a moment before standing up again. He nodded his head and said, "Found 'em. Let's go."

"You...your Aura again?" Serena asked, keeping her voice low.

He nodded his head. "Yeah. I don't need to touch the ground but when there's a lot of people around it's easier to focus."

She always thought that it was just a strange little tick where he'd touch the ground or a tree or something, but he must have been looking for people or checking the area around him. It made her wonder just how much she actually knew about Ash Ketchum, because what she thought she knew was much easier to comprehend than the reality of it all.

They met up with Leaf and Gary quickly enough. Pikachu cooed in happiness when he spied his trainer and jumped up into his arms.

"This one," Leaf nodded her head. "Follow me, I figured out how to get on."

"Did you knock that guy out?" Misty asked, her voice raising a bit when she spotted a sailor by a ramp.

"No, she egged him into getting completely drunk," Gary deadpanned as they walked up. Leaf didn't seem apologetic about that at all. "Ash, keep an eye out for people coming." The boy in question gave his friend a thumbs up. "Alright, let's go and be quiet." They carefully made their way into the hull of the ship without anyone noticing them, ready to set off to Hoenn in secrecy.

Til next time,

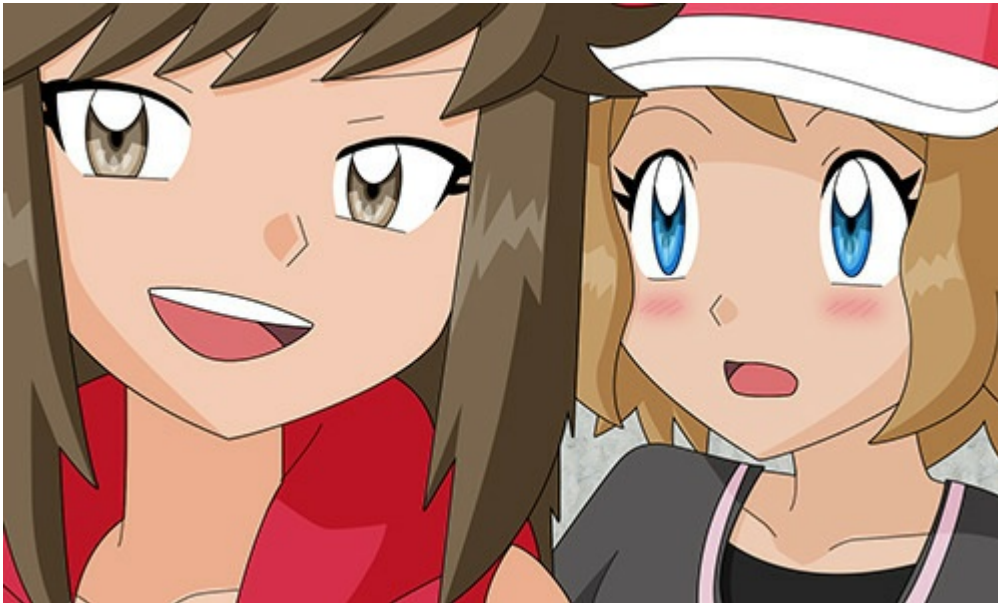
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Recon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



"I'm going to be sick." Clemont groaned as he leaned against a wooden crate. He had his hand over his mouth and his face looked a little green.

"I hear ya," Gary agreed from his spot across from him. He was also leaning against a large crate, trying to focus on his shoes to get his bearings. He groaned in discomfort as the boat shifted beneath them. "Ugh, I never get seasick. This sucks."

"If I could look at paper or any type of writing right now I'd try to make something that might make this better, but I don't think I can right now," the blond admitted.

"That's the first thing we're doing when we get to Slateport."

While the two boys stayed tucked away in their miserable corner, the girls and Ash were sitting in their own nook, hidden by the cargo that was latched down in the boat. Leaf, Serena and Misty were sitting in an odd triangle while Ash was stretched out behind Misty. The three girls all had cards out in front of them, trying to pass the time. Originally, Ash had been playing with them but he grew bored quickly. He and Pikachu decided that their time was better spent taking a nap, though he was still half awake.

"Think they'll be okay?" Serena asked as her blue eyes flickered to where Gary and Clemont were. The two boys claimed that they felt better off in their own small corner. Whether that was actually true or not remained to be seen, but if they thought it helped then that was good enough.

"They'll be fine," Misty assured her with a nod of her head, sea green eyes focusing on the frustratingly large amount of cards in her hands. She groaned and picked another one up from the pile. "I'm not this bad at Crazy Eights. You two are cheating somehow."

"At Crazy Eights?" Leaf stared at the redhead with a raised eyebrow. "I think you just suck."

"Ugh, I do not!" Misty tossed her cards down, pouting. "I give up!" She flopped backwards, the back of her head landing on Ash's stomach.

He grunted, his eyes flying open as he sat up, causing her head to slip onto his lap instead. Glaring down at her, Ash asked, "What was that for?" Pikachu glared at both of them and moved over to where they had a pile of blankets, turning his back to them.

"She's just being a pouty loser," Leaf answered while snickering. Serena tried to hide her grin behind her cards unsuccessfully.

"I am not." Misty muttered as she got up and shifted so that her face was pressed against his neck. "Right, Ash?" He snorted with amusement and she smacked his stomach and pulled away, glaring at him.

Ash laughed and reached out, grabbing her arm and drawing her back to his chest, ignoring her small complaints. With one arm around her, he rested his forehead on the shoulder that was exposed by her shirt. "Don't be like that."

"You two are so cute, it's disgusting," Leaf noted as she and Serena kept playing the game, having weeded out both Ash and Misty now. She made a face and looked over her shoulder when she heard someone gag, not able to tell if it was Gary or Clemont. "Not as much as that though."

"We're almost to Hoenn," Misty noted, ignoring Leaf's earlier statement. The redhead loved the sea more than any of them, but with the choppy water and the consistent rain, no one was having much fun and they all wanted to be back on dry land. They couldn't really do all that much since sometimes crew members would come down, though that was a rarity. Instead, they stayed in their concealed spots and did what they could in small areas.

She leaned back against Ash as his hand slid down to her side instead, drawing random shapes on her skin in an almost subconscious action.

Then he suddenly stopped, his entire body tensing up.

"Ash?" Misty looked up at him, her chin leaning against his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I..." He trailed off, face scrunching up with confusion. They all jumped when a bell suddenly started ringing out from above them on the deck. Serena dropped her cards and looked up, gasping as the boat lurched. She slid back, her back colliding with the crates behind her that were thankfully tied down, no doubt filled with fragile objects. Leaf slid after her, nearly crashing into her. Across from them, the same thing happened to Ash and Misty. They both rolled into a mess of tangled limbs, nearly crushing a very alarmed Pikachu in the process. A moment later, everything settled down.

"There goes my lunch," Clemont muttered as he got up and hurried over to everyone else. "Are you guys okay?" He held a hand out to Serena, who grabbed it and let him pull her up. She stumbled a bit from the waves of the ship, but managed to get her footing.

"Someone's coming," Gary said as he ran over, shoving the two that were standing in the nook that they had been in before. They crashed into Leaf, Misty and Ash, and the group of six ended up in an awkward dog-pile with Pikachu managing to scramble to the top to avoid being crushed. No one moved, both so they wouldn't touch anyone else inappropriately, and so the men that ran down below the deck wouldn't hear them.

Misty looked down at Ash, so close that their noses were brushing against each other, but instead of feeling awkward like everyone else seemed to, she was fine. Instead of actually speaking, she mouthed, "Where are they?"

He moved his eyes and nodded his head to the left. They were all silent, trying to keep their breathing shallow and staying out of sight. Once the men went upstairs, Ash let out a breath. "They're gone."

Sighs of relief softly echoed from each of them as they quickly untangled themselves, giving everyone a bit of personal space. Misty simply got up and shifted slightly so she was beside Ash rather than on top of him. "What the hell was that?"

Ash looked at the hull of the ship. "Kyogre." Pikachu's ears perked up and the name and he stared at the wall almost like he could see the Pokémon.

"What? Are you sure?" Leaf was the one who spoke, and her wariness startled him a bit. Well, it was more her audible wariness combined with everyone else's alarm. He didn't understand their reaction until he remembered the images of the flooded streets of Cerulean City. They had every reason not to trust the legendary Pokémon, yet here they were trying to help the most powerful of them all.

"I don't think she's here to hurt anything," he clarified, pressing his hand against the wall. "She's circling the boat but she doesn't feel angry." Shrugging, Ash could admit that he didn't understand what the legendary Pokémon was doing.

"Why would she be..." Clemont trailed off, pushing his glasses back up the brim of his nose. "Could she be herding us somewhere?"

"Why would she do that?" Serena asked, both confused and a bit alarmed.

The blond boy's eyes turned to Ash. "To take us where we need to go."

Ash opened his mouth to respond to that, but didn't get the chance to talk as the intercom system came to life. "We will be docking in Sootopolis Harbour. Hopefully this beast will leave us alone after that."

A part of Ash wanted to ask since when did Sootopolis have a harbour, since he could distinctly remember how isolated it was, but that question was washed away when he remembered just who was sleeping within a cavern. "Oh no." When Kyogre and Groudon met, it never meant good things for them.

...

Sneaking off of the ship wasn't that hard, not with a few small Pokémon like Umbreon, Espeon and Pikachu to act as a distraction. They definitely got some odd looks as they rushed away from the boat by those who saw them.

The docks that Ash wanted to question were surprising and definitely new compared to the last time he had been in Sootopolis City. They were on the outside of the mountains that surrounded the city, and there was a narrow passageway into it.

"This definitely wasn't here the last time I came," Ash noted offhandedly as he looked around. He couldn't really describe it, so he didn't try, but something just felt off about the whole place. A quick glance around told him that he was the only one that got the feeling. Not even Pikachu seemed to notice anything strange from his spot on Ash's shoulder.

Maybe he just needed more sleep.

"They just opened them this year," Leaf mentioned, sounding much better now that her feet were

firmly planted on the ground. "There was some sort of earthquake – a natural one – that resulted in part of the mountain cracking apart. They decided to go the rest of the way since it was really unstable and voila. Docks."

"That's right, you competed in Hoenn this year, didn't you?" Ash asked, suddenly distracted.

"Came in the top four," she replied proudly, puffing up her chest a bit. "Might not be the finals but it's not bad."

"That gym used to belong to Wallace," Misty noted in an almost far-away tone. "I always wanted to see it. I heard it was beautiful." She spun around, walking backwards to take in the city itself. Almost every single one of the buildings was made out of carved, white stone, all running along the inside of the mountain. Opposite of them, there was a giant set of stone doors, a massive lake in the middle of it all.

"This whole place is beautiful," Serena said in awe.

"I hate to rain on everyone's parade," Gary toned in with a sigh, "but if Kyogre wanted us here, doesn't that mean there's probably something that we have to find?"

"Yeah," Ash's shoulders slumped, brown eyes locking on the set of doors far away from them. "The Cave of Origin. I'd bet anything there's something in there but..."

"That's where they say Groudon sleeps," Leaf finished for him, understanding his apprehension of accidentally waking the beast when his natural rival was so close.

"Maybe he's the one that guards it," Clemont theorized as they climbed up a set of stairs. "Celebi was guarding the normal orb, so maybe he's guarding one too. The ground one."

"Moltres guards fire," Misty told him as she scooted around a person that refused to move. "So if Groudon's guarding one it's probably that one."

"Okay, so first we should..." Gary trailed off and everyone stared at Ash as his stomach grumbled loudly. On his shoulder, Pikachu's did the same. Trainer and Pokémon both smiled sheepishly, rubbing the back of their heads in identical actions. "We should get some food so you don't give us away."

"I'm a growing boy and he's an active Pokémon," Ash protested, coming to a stop. Misty just shook her head and tugged him along with the rest of the group.

...

Serena and Clemont were the ones who ducked into the market to pick up some food for them. The odds of Ash, Misty and Leaf being recognized were far too high. Once the two were back, they moved out of view to one of the farthest picnic tables away. No one gave them a second glance.

"The people here are acting weird," Clemont noted nervously as he forced himself to eat. After being sick on the ship for so long, he was absolutely ravenous and knew he needed to eat something, despite his nervousness.

"How?" Gary asked, glancing up from his small, packaged meal.

"Like they're scared of something."

"Well, Groudon is said to live here, right?" Leaf pointed out. "After everything that's happened in

Kanto, I'd be nervous too."

"That big hulk of a guy we saw didn't seem nervous," Serena said while rolling her eyes. She glanced over at Clemont. "The one that looks like he eats steroids for breakfast with that weird A tattoo on his chest? Cause he wasn't wearing a shirt?"

"It's hard to forget him," he shrugged. "Especially compared to that purple-haired girl in red that was with him. Big guys like that are never nervous. They think they own the world, right?" Clemont sounded surprisingly bitter, something he realized fairly quickly as his cheeks turned red. "Sorry."

Misty made a face at the carrots in her food and picked up the container, tipping it and forking the orange vegetables onto Ash's food. He didn't even blink, just stabbing one of the carrots with his fork and eating it. He looked thoughtful as he chewed. "Guess we should try and get in and out of the cave pretty quickly." Ash watched Pikachu struggle with a small ketchup packet for a moment before reaching forward and opening it for him. Everyone was allowed to indulge a little bit.

"Easier said than done," Leaf noted, leaning back so she could see the massive doors in the distance. "When I was here, I mentioned wanting to see it and the Gym Leader went on and on about how only a select few could and how it really had to be Wallace who gave permission along with some elders and things like that. Wallace is the Champion now."

"So if we try to get permission, not only do we have to wait, but he just might ship us back to Johto instead," Gary finished, realizing where she was going with her thought process.

"So what do we do then?" Serena wondered.

"Wait until it gets dark and break in," Misty answered and everyone looked at her oddly. "What? You have a better plan? Dig our way in?"

"We need to be careful, people are on edge," Leaf said, her voice surprisingly stern and wary. In a way, it reminded Ash more of the 14-year-old he ended up running into back in Sinnoh, the one who was a little distant and much more serious than she was now. "Look, we've been lucky up to this point. Ridiculously lucky. We can't just go up and try to break in. It's the home of a legendary Pokémon. If it was that easy everyone would skip in to see Kyogre. We need an actual plan, not an Ash-special."

"An Ash-special?" The boy in question repeated slowly.

"Where you jump in and make everything up as you go along," Gary answered for her. "Works well for you but not always everyone else."

"What about the tours?" Everyone looked towards Clemont, who was staring out towards the Cave of Origin. "There are tours for Sootopolis and they talk about the Cave of Origin. It's our chance to get up close to the doors."

"Now that's an idea," Gary pointed at him and then looked at Misty with a raised eyebrow. "You have been spending far too much time with Ashy-boy to come up with a let's-break-in plan." She glared at him.

"You two go," Leaf nodded at the two boys. "Serena and I can go around the city and actually try talking to people. There are a lot of gossips around."

"I thought you couldn't go or you'd be recognized?" Gary asked her.

She shrugged. "We need more eyes out there. Better me than Misty and Ash."

"And what are we going to do?" Misty asked, pointing to herself and her boyfriend.

"Stay low and wait here," she answered. They both started to protest but she held up her hand.

"Don't. If the league's looking for anyone or put anyone face out there, it's you Ash. Not to mention we don't know if maybe Team Rocket's still looking for you too. And Misty, we know it's not your fault, but Giovanni called you out as the reason Cerulean was targeted. People are going to recognize you. So yeah, you two are laying low until we actually go in, okay?"

"Alright." Nobody even tried to hide their surprise at the fact that Ash agreed so quickly, and even Pikachu looked confused. "You guys still have the walkie-talkies, right? We'll stay out of the way and you guys can just call us when you get back."

"Alright then," Leaf looked at Clemont and Gary. "Looks like you two have a tour to catch."

"And we have some gossiping to do," Serena added with a small smile on her face. She was actually a little nervous about going with only Leaf, but she knew that she had to.

"Stay out of trouble," Gary told Ash. "And remember the conversation in the car? None of that here either." His childhood friend rolled his eyes and shook his head while Misty just glared at Gary. It was one of those glares that made him move farther away and nod to Clemont. "Let's go."

The blond nodded his head and looked back at Serena. "Good luck." She smiled and watched them go, an oddly foreboding feeling welling up within her.

Serena held her hand over her chest and her smile dropped. "Why do I get the feeling that something bad is going to happen?"

"Because splitting up is always a bad idea," Leaf replied, watching them walk away. "But it's all we've got. Come on. We'll go mingle." She looked back at the other two. "I'm not mother Gary, I don't care what you guys do just keep it quiet."

"You had to tell her, didn't you?" Misty asked Ash with a raised eyebrow.

Completely ignoring her question, he grabbed her hand and tugged her a bit. "Come on, we're going to do something a bit productive at least."

"Like what?" She followed him without any hesitation, Pikachu walking along side them.

"We're going to see what Kyogre's doing."

...

No one batted an eye at Clemont and Gary when they joined the tour group. It wasn't uncommon for Pokémon trainers to take an interest in the city, or at least try to kill time when the Gym Leader wasn't there. Luckily, they caught the tour before it got to the Cave of Origin. Unluckily, that just meant that they had to deal with the rest of the tour as it covered places that neither of them were really interested in.

"You know, if we didn't have some apparent timeline hanging over our heads, it'd be cool to explore this place more," Gary admitted. "Sootopolis is one of the oldest cities in the world that's still actually used." He frowned a bit when they passed by a new television tower that stuck out like a sore thumb against the old architecture of the city. "It's one of those places that should be left alone."

"I don't know, I like the idea of seeing progress," Clemont replied as he looked up. "Seeing what people can do to advance everything, to make lives better. It's just as amazing as seeing where it all came from."

Gary laughed a bit at that. "Ash said you were an inventor. I'm all for that, but there's a place for everything, and this city, it's not it."

"You do research about extinct Pokémon, right?"

"Well I'm not a lead researcher or anything. I go on digs or help with research as an intern, I'm doing all the class work online. Got done with the high school part early so I figured, why not?" Clemont was a bit surprised by how genuinely humble Gary seemed. From the way Ash had gone on, it sounded like complimenting him would just lead to hours of bragging.

The blond was going to ask a few more questions when he realized that they were coming up on the destination that they were actually interested in. Up close, he could tell that the doors were made from the same stone as the rest of the town. He might be able to get some sort of device under the bottom to help them open it. It certainly looked like a heavy enough door.

"The Cave of Origin is a place of great power," the tour guide spoke up, trying to sound excited about something they probably said four or five times a day. "Despite the rumours, this is not just the sleeping place for Groudon. The real story says that Groudon sleeps deep in the caverns within Mt. Chimney while Kyogre sleeps in caverns at the ocean floor."

Gary and Clemont exchanged alarmed expressions. It wouldn't really be all that surprising if Ash mixed up an old legend he heard a long time ago, but Leaf had agreed with him. They were both thinking the exact same thing. If they were wrong, then not only did they need to get to the mainland of Hoenn as soon as possible to keep looking, but that meant that Kyogre corralled them there for another reason altogether. That was something neither of them wanted to think about.

"So where does the story about Groudon come from?" Gary asked casually.

"Well," the woman smiled at him, "there are lesser known stories that say that Groudon comes here more frequently, traveling through vast cave systems to get here." She lowered her voice and spoke with an air of mystery. "They say that it keeps something there and comes to protect it during a time of crisis. Over the past few years, there have been more tremors and earthquakes around here, and they say that's Groudon on the move. In fact he might even be down there right now."

"Oh, can we go look?" A little girl cried out.

"No sweetie, the doors are heavy to keep people out and inside is a dangerous labyrinth of tunnels. We'd get lost for sure! Only Champion Wallace and the Elders are said to know the way."

"Doesn't that make you scared? With what happened in Kanto?" This time, Gary disguised his voice so the woman wouldn't realize that he was the one asking all the questions.

"Not really," her voice was earnest and honest. "We live with the knowledge that the legendary Pokémon could wake and fight at any time. They have their reasons for doing things. Besides, Team Rocket doesn't have a presence here so there's no need to worry."

"Somehow I get the feeling that she's wrong about not needing to worry," Clemont muttered.

"You and me both."

...

When Serena pictured what she and Leaf would be doing in town, she imagined stayed in the shadows, eavesdropping on people and looking unnecessarily shady.

What Serena pictured was absolutely wrong. The two girls were sitting at a quaint coffee shop with frothy, iced drinks. Leaf was talking with a tall young man, smiling, giggling and fluttering her eyes. It was actually pretty funny to see.

"Wait, so they leave protecting the Cave of Origin to a couple old men?" Her voice sounded so forced and fake that Serena had to focus on her drink so that she wouldn't laugh. "That seems a bit silly to me."

"It works out pretty well for everyone around here," he replied, smiling at her. "I could show you later, if you wanted."

Leaf leaned away, crossing her arms in front of her and raising an eyebrow. She tilted her head slightly and looked at him almost thoughtfully. "I'm busy later. And I can't ditch my friend." She nodded her head towards Serena, who had largely kept to herself. She wasn't used to being around someone who was so forward with flirting. It was actually making her a little bit uncomfortable.

"She can come too." The young man's words startled Serena so much that she actually couldn't hide how mortified she actually was. Her cheeks turned red and she actually slumped down a little bit in her chair, squeezing the plastic cup for her iced coffee.

Leaf's dusty-brown eyes flickered towards her and she frowned a little bit. The frown vanished quickly as she brushed her hair out of her face and smiled again at the young man. "Sorry sweetie. Gotta at least know your name for that."

Instead of looking offended, he laughed loudly. "Fair enough. Given what's been happening around here."

Their eyes both looked at one another quickly and Serena straightened up again. She frowned a little bit and said, "What do you mean what's happening?"

He looked genuinely surprised at the question. "Yeah, you didn't hear?" They both just stared at him. "Rumour says that Team Aqua and Team Magma are back, working together."

Once again, the two teenage girls looked at one another. Serena tugged a bit at her blonde hair and asked, "Working together?"

"Yeah." His voice lowered. "It's mostly on the mainland but we've seen them here too. Or people thought to be them."

"Has rumour said what they're up to?" Leaf asked, twirling her hair around her finger.

"Some people say that they're recruiting. Here's the kicker though, it's not just for them. It's for Team Rocket too. You must have heard what's happening in Kanto and Johto, right?"

"We've heard," Leaf answered, all sweetness and flirtation escaping her voice. "Sorry to run, but I think we should go meet up with our friends. I'd like to stay but you know, if they heard the same thing they'll probably get worried." She stood up, stretching out and grabbing her drink. Serena was quick to get up along with her, sipping at her own drink with slightly shaking hands.

"I'm sorry about that," Leaf said quickly as they walked away. She could just tell how uncomfortable Serena had been the entire time. "But dear sweet Mew. Team Aqua, Team Magma and Team Rocket? Oh that's not a coincidence. I think we found out how the enemy is spread far

and wide."

"Do you think that Team Rocket might be working with other Teams in other regions?" Serena asked, alarmed by the possibility.

"I think that whatever Team Rocket's up to, it's a lot bigger than we thought." She shook her head. "Come on, let's go see if anyone else has heard anything about this."

...

Misty stared down the cliffs at the vast ocean. A soft ocean breeze gently rustled her hair. With the warm sun in the sky and the salty smell in the air, she would have normally adored being in a place like this. Now, all she could do was stare warily at the massive shadow that swam by every once in a while. She and Ash weren't the only ones watching Kyogre, others were as well, but they managed to keep themselves concealed.

"I wish it would just do something one way or another," she muttered.

Ash looked over at her, his fingers halting in scratching Pikachu's ears. "Huh?" He tilted his head curiously.

She shrugged a little bit. "I mean, I just wish it would go away or attack, whatever it's going to do."

"She's not here to hurt anything." Ash turned back to Pikachu, scratching under his chin. The confidence in his voice, instead of reassuring her like it normally did, actually made her bristle with anger.

The redhead pursed her lips slightly, crossing her arms in front of her, "How can you be so sure? After what they've done?"

"I can't explain Regigigas, or Articuno, Zapdos and Moltres. I have no idea why Manaphy did what she did," he admitted, looking down towards the water and motioning to the shadow that passed by them, "but I'm positive Kyogre's not here to cause trouble. I can feel it."

"Right, and that's never been wrong."

Her sharp tone made Ash pause. He ceased his scratching, and Pikachu sighed, jumping off of his lap and sitting on the rocks, watching the two warily. His trainer looked around, brown eyes narrowing slightly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Misty returned the harsh look. She thought about keeping her mouth shut for a moment, but couldn't stop her words from escaping. "Maybe you feel something but you are the one who interprets what it is. You told me so. Maybe it's tricking you. Maybe you're just trying to look for something good when it's not there." She didn't admit it, but it was something that she was genuinely worried about.

"If Kyogre was going to do something do you think she would have led us here?" Ash argued with her, motioning out to the water yet again.

"Yes," she replied bluntly. "Maybe we're helping the legendary Pokémon screw over everything. Did you ever think about that? That getting these orbs is going to do more harm than good? That's they're using you?" Her voice rose and she had to take deep breaths to keep herself calm.

"They wouldn't. Arceus—"

"Right, cause Arceus hasn't tried to kill everyone before!" Misty snapped at Ash's denial, her fear and anger rolling off of her in waves as she started yelling, standing up to glare at him. "All we have to go on is a dream you had. And Celebi; but you know Celebi can jump between times so maybe it knows how this is going to end and is just telling us what it has to. We might be helping them destroy everything and you refuse to see it!"

"I'm sorry if I don't want to see the whole world in doom and gloom!" Ash growled as he stood up, taking a step towards her. "Yeah, I have to figure out what I feel from others but I'm sure of this."

"Manaphy killed my sisters, Ash!" She shrieked, not even thinking about the attention they were probably drawing towards themselves. "They're dead because of that stupid Pokémon and because of me and because of—"

"Go on, say it." Ash's voice dropped, not growling, but still obviously angry. "Because of me, right? You saved me. That made Giovanni target Cerulean instead of wherever. You don't think that hasn't run through my head? That's really what you think? That I haven't thought of Arceus trying to trick us? That I'm stupid enough not to worry about any of that?"

"It wouldn't be the first time."

Ash stared at her. "If you're so against it then why did you bother coming? That's not like you."

"No but it is like you to just run ahead no matter what anyone says and someone has to be here to keep an eye on you." Misty took a step towards him, jabbing her finger at his chest.

Ash pushed her hand away roughly. "Because I'm too stupid to take care of myself, right?" The two just stared at one another for a moment, breathing heavily with anger. The boy took a step away from the redhead. "You know what, since saving me just causes more problems for you, don't bother next time." He turned around and stormed away.

"Ash!"

"Pikapi!"

He completely ignored Misty and Pikachu, even as his Pokémon ran after him. He got back to the inside of the city and accidentally bumped into a purple-haired girl. Ash grabbed her arm before she could fall over. "Sorry." Once he was sure that she wasn't going to fall, he kept going. The teenager wasn't entirely sure where he wanted to go, he just wanted to be alone.

He didn't notice the girl that he crashed into do a double-take and stare at him oddly. She watched him walk away, eyeing Pikachu as the Pokémon jumped up on his shoulder. Slowly, she reached down her phone and scrolled through a few different things until she found what she wanted. "Well, I'll be damned."

...

"Serena!" Clemont saw his friend and waved at her. She whipped around, alarmed at first before smiling and waving back. He hurried over, Gary not far behind him. "You won't believe what we found out."

"It's probably not as big as what we found out."

"We found a way to get through the doors at the Cave of Origin."

"We found out that Team Rocket's in Hoenn working with Team Aqua and Team Magma."

Clemont opened his mouth to say something but promptly closed it, staring at her blankly. If the situation wouldn't have been so serious, both girls might have laughed over the fact that Gary had the exact same expression and they both looked completely gobsmacked.

"Are you serious?" Gary finally choked out.

"Dead serious, we asked around." Leaf nodded her head. "It sounds like Team Aqua and Magma are working together and that they might be working with Team Rocket."

"Or for it," Serena added, putting a hand on her hip. "Does this really change that much though?"

"Maybe not for the four of us, but Ash got away from Team Rocket once. I bet they'd jump to grab him again just because of that. I'm sure Giovanni would love to rub what happened to Cerulean City in Misty's face first," Gary sighed.

"No, the two of us," Leaf motioned to her childhood friend and herself. "We're the most anonymous ones in this situation. You two were with Ash in Kalos. That could have put a mark on you two as well. We...we all just need to be careful."

"Well, we should get back then. We should make a plan and then move as quickly as we can," Clemont said, nervously looking over his shoulder.

"And hope that there is an orb down there," Gary added with a grimace. "There might not be."

"This just gets better and better, doesn't it?" Leaf muttered as she led the way back to where they had all split up earlier. They never specifically said that they'd all meet up there again, but it made sense. Luckily, Ash and Misty were on the same wavelength.

Serena blinked with confusion at the scene that they found. She expected them to be sitting together, a bit annoyed at being left behind but eager to make a plan and go. Instead, she was staring at Pikachu, who was exhausted and wary, looking back and forth between Ash and Misty. The couple in question were sitting quite a ways away from one another, facing in opposite directions with almost identical angry expressions.

"Oh Arceus," Gary groaned under his breath. Serena looked at him curiously and he shook his head. "Don't say anything when they're near each other, it'll just make them explode. Trust me on that." Walking forward, he cleared his throat, making both of them jump a bit. "So we found out a few things. How to get in the Cave of Origin, the fact that we might be in the wrong spot altogether, and that Team Aqua and Magma are working together lately, and they've been recruiting for Team Rocket too so they're working with them."

"We might be in the wrong spot?" Misty repeated, an edge to her voice that none of them liked.

"Maybe," Clemont said, stepping up despite how hesitant he sounded. "It's a possibility but I kind of doubt it. The Cave of Origin is where Groudon and Kyogre would go to get some sort of new power or extra strength, something like that. They say that Groudon might be hiding something else here though so it still seems pretty likely."

"And if not, it means Kyogre led us here for a reason that doesn't involve helping us, right?" Though she was responding to Clemont, the sharp point was clearly aimed at Ash. "Well would you look at that."

"It's there," Ash snapped at her, not bothering to hide how annoyed he was. "Though I know I need to wave it in your face before you believe that."

"Stop it!" Everyone was startled when Serena growled at them. She put her hands on her hips and glared at the two. "I don't know what happened, I don't care. We came here to go in that cave, so let's plan a way to get in." She didn't have any special powers like Ash, she wasn't as smart as Clemont or Gary, and she certainly wasn't as quick as Leaf, but every inch of her had the terrible feeling that they needed to move fast. It was an unsettling feeling, like they were being hunted and the predator was closing in on them.

"How do we get in?" Ash asked after a moment of silence, his shoulders slumping a little bit.

"We wait 'til the old men go to sleep," Leaf said, a smirk crossing her lips.

"Then we use the device I have that will help us open the door," Clemont added. "Simple on paper, right?" No one said it, but they all understood. It was incredibly simply on paper, meaning it was bound to end badly in some way.

Chapter End Notes

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Where The Land And Sea Clash

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



For one of the most revered places in Hoenn, known for how secret and protected it was, it was surprisingly easy to break in. They waited until the old man on guard duty fell asleep, and Leaf got Venusaur to sprinkle a little bit of sleep powder so that he wouldn't wake up from any of the noises they made.

Clemont took what looked like a flat, metallic square out of his bag and slid it under the very small space beneath the large door. He attached a pole to it and pressed a couple buttons. Ash and Serena both held their breath, silently praying that it wouldn't explode and both sighing in relief when it didn't. "Okay, we just need to pull. It'll help take off the weight."

"That's really cool," Gary admitted, staring at the device quizzically. "How does—?"

"You can geek out later," Leaf hissed at him. "We need to go before someone notices us. What do we do, Clemont?"

"Just pull." All six of them grabbed the bar and slowly started tugging. It took a moment, but the door slowly started to slide open. They stopped when the entrance was just open enough for them to squeeze through, since there was no need for it to be opened all the way.

A Pokéball was tossed up into the air, and Ria appeared from the light. She stretched out her tired limbs and nodded at them before turning to Ash.

"You're going to stay up here with Clemont and Serena to be a lookout, okay?" Silently, he added, "Keep them safe."

Ria eyed him oddly for a moment before slowly nodding her head, taking a few steps away and sitting down with her legs crossed, making herself comfortable.

"Okay," Ash turned to look at his two friends from Kalos. "You guys be careful up here. Tell us if anyone comes."

"We're not the ones that need to be careful," Serena said, her blue eyes flickering from him, to Leaf, to Gary and to Misty. "Good luck."

She, Clemont and Ria watched the rest of the group squeeze into the caverns that ran deep beneath the island. She took a deep breath and looked over at her friend. "Am I the only one that has a bad feeling?"

"No," he assured her. "We just...have to do our part. Right?"

"Right." Serena nodded her head and turned back around to look at Sootopolis City, which looked both beautiful and eerie in the moonlight. "Let's just hope they hurry."

...

Gary had been in a lot of uncomfortable situations in his life, and most of them had involved two of the three people that he was currently walking down the steep, humid tunnels of the Cave of Origin with. Despite the fact that Ash and Leaf got the legend wrong initially, Gary was fairly sure that Groudon was actually in the Cave of Origin. If the second legend about him hiding something powerful down there was accurate, it wasn't a far cry to think that the thing he could have been protecting was the orb they wanted.

He was starting to wonder if facing a potentially angry legendary Pokémon after walking through a perpetually long maze was the lesser of two evils compared to the obvious tension between Ash and Misty. They didn't say a word to one another, Ash leading the way and Misty trailing behind Gary and Leaf, and maybe that was the problem in his mind. The silent anger was stifling.

The cave suddenly shook under their feet. Pikachu's ears twitched and he let out a whine that made the hair on Gary's neck stand on end.

"Maybe we should go back up for now," Misty suggested warily as she stared at the walls.

"No," Ash shook his head. "If something's gonna happen we need to get the orb and get out." While everyone else had their hands out to keep their balance down the steep slopes, Ash kept his arms close to him, his left hand brushing against his keystone nervously.

This wasn't lost on his friends. Leaf pursed her lips slightly, speeding up a little bit to catch up with him. "Hey, are you okay?" Knowing that Ash was the type to say that he was fine even if he was going around with a broken limb, she didn't wait for an answer. "Cause you're all twitchy and it's making me nervous."

He sighed, his shoulders slumping slightly. "Something feels...off about this."

"Off?" Gary repeated slowly, coming to a stop. "As in, we shouldn't be going down here odd?"

"No, not that." Ash shook his head. "As in something having a really weird aura type of way. I don't really...it's not Kyogre or Groudon but...it's hard to explain. It's like there's something that's just...wrong."

"That's helpful," his childhood friend sighed, not bothering to hide his annoyance. "Wanna try explaining that again, 'cause I'm smart and I don't even get what you're saying."

"It's all...well...the best way to explain it...I see Aura as this pale, blue-green colour but..." Ash

trailed off, staring at something that only he could see. "But there's something else here too, something orange, and that's not normal. At all."

Misty's brow furrowed briefly, but then her eyes went wide as she realized why that sounded so familiar. She opened her mouth to reveal her discovery, when the cave shook violently. She screamed as she was thrown forward. Ash shot around just in time, catching her and stumbling back against the wall in an attempt to brace both of them, Pikachu holding onto his leg. Gary slipped, but Leaf managed to grab him before he could slide too far down the tunnel, pulling him to the wall opposite of them.

The redhead closed her eyes so that the dust and small rocks that fell onto them wouldn't go in. Ash knelt down so that they wouldn't trip and fall, taking her with him. Misty reached out, grabbing Pikachu and holding him between her and Ash.

A loud sound, an angry cry, pierced the air, sending shivers up all their spines. The worst part of it was the fact that, because of the echo, they had no idea which direction the chilling sound came from.

...

Clemont checked his device to make sure that it was still working, not wanting the door to slam shut or something like that while Ash and the others were down in the Cave of Origin. He sighed with relief, glad that one of his inventions seemed to be working without a problem.

He sat down on the ground and looked out over Sootopolis City. A pang rushed through him as he realized that Bonnie would absolutely love it here. Actually, she would have loved this whole adventure so far. It was much more up her alley than his, but his sister was far too young.

Not for the first time, Clemont wondered what it was that compelled him to come with Ash. They hadn't really known what was going on at the time, they had few details and almost immediately they were faced with hardships that they couldn't predict. He could have stayed back with Bonnie and his father. Clemont knew for a fact that Ash wouldn't have held that against him at all. It was the type of person he was.

Movement caught his eye, and he looked up to see Ria standing up. The Pokémon looked around a bit, but didn't make a fuss about anything being close. She probably just sensed someone coming a little closer and was keeping an eye on them.

The Lucario was a reminder of just how much Ash had kept from them. That stung a little bit, since Clemont considered the raven-haired trainer to be one of his best friends. He understood the logistics of why Ash kept quiet about being able to use an ability like Aura, at least at first, but he could have kept a secret. At least he knew it wasn't a personal thing.

His eyes slid over to where Serena was sitting. He stared at her for a moment as she scribbled at something, squinting in the moonlight. Clemont didn't mean to stare, but he must have, because she looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"Huh?" His face turned red and he was glad that it was dark so she couldn't tell. "Sorry. I was just wondering what you're doing. Not that you have to tell me or anything."

Serena eyed him for a moment before smiling warmly. "It's okay. I actually decided to keep a journal about this whole crazy adventure. Mostly for Bonnie. It'll be a good story for her after it's over."

"After it's over?" He laughed slightly. "You sound like Ash."

"Careful, that's not always a compliment," she shook her head, clearly amused. "I guess, I just think that he has the right idea this time around. You know, keeping the big picture in sight."

"Fair enough," Clemont agreed. "I—." He stopped himself when Ria suddenly jerked up. "What's wrong?"

"What in the world is that?" Ria muttered, her ears twitching a bit as she took a few steps back.

Clemont stood up, Serena joining him a moment later after she put her journal away. The two trainers stood on either side of the Pokémon, staring out at Sootopolis City. "I don't see any—." This time Serena stopped talking when all of the lights turned off at once. "This can't be good."

There was a sudden, incredibly loud thump that made the ground around them shake. Another and another followed it, repeating over and over again in a familiar rhythm.

"Footsteps," Clemont called out. A loud, angry roar filled the air and the lights turned on again. What he saw both shocked and confused him.

Standing tall, Groudon roared again, facing the harbour. He took several steps forward, the ground shaking with every stomp. A second, angry cry answered, and without any other type of warning, Kyogre launched herself out of the water and at the creature.

The ground shook violently, knocking them to the ground. Rocks rolled down at them, and Ria threw her paws up, shrugging off the boulders, her entire body shaking as she did. Once they were safely tossed aside, she slumped down and rubbed her paws.

"What's wrong?" Serena called out to the Pokémon.

"It's not working very well," she muttered.

"What's not?"

"My Aura."

"Oh Arceus." Clemont didn't actually know what it meant by her Aura not working right, but he knew it had to be bad. He grabbed his bag and dug through for his walkie-talkie as Kyogre and Groudon fought in the water in the middle of the city.

...

The shaking prevented them from going farther into the cave. Instead, Ash, Misty, Gary, Leaf and Pikachu continued to brace themselves against the walls and each other. In between tremors, the loud hiss of walkie-talkies went off.

"Guys!" Clemont's voice managed to overpower the sound of the earth shaking around them. "You need to hurry!"

"Clemont?" Gary reached back into his bag and grabbed his walkie-talkie. "What's going on?"

"It's not down there!"

"What's not?"

"Groudon! Groudon's up here! He's—holy—!" His voice cut off as the walkie-talkie went dead.

"Clemont? Serena?" Gary tried hitting buttons but got no response and looked around at the others with wide eyes. "That doesn't sound good."

"What did he mean Groudou's up there?" Misty asked, her voice shaking.

"I don't know, but you need to get up there." Gary, Leaf and Misty all looked at Ash, who stared at them seriously.

"What?" Leaf asked.

"Go help them with whatever's going on up there." Ash motioned above them. "I need to go down here, but none of you do. I'll be fine."

Leaf and Gary exchanged odd looks, like they were deciding who was going to argue with Ash. Both of them came to the conclusion that there was no point. Ash was stubbornness personified. Plus if Clemont was right, Groudou was above them now so it was probably safer within the caverns than outside of it. "Alright," Leaf answered for both of them.

Misty's eyes shot to them, looking almost betrayed before she turned around to Ash, carefully letting go of Pikachu and grabbing onto his arms instead. "I'm not letting you go alone."

Ash stood up, and she stood up with him, not daring to let go. If anything, her grip got tighter, nails sinking into his skin. He frowned as he stared at her, moving his arms back so that he was holding her hands instead. The cave started shaking again, and Ash leaned down, kissing her briefly before shoving her back. "Yes, you are."

Misty let out a startled yelp but managed to keep her footing. She glared at him fiercely, but that glare vanished, her face going pale. She held out her hand and walked forward, but stopped when it collided with something solid that she couldn't see. "Ash. Take the barrier down."

"Go find Serena and Clemont." He nodded towards Pikachu while taking a few steps backwards. His Pokémon jumped up and started following him.

"Take the barrier down!" Misty slammed her fist against it, making it visible for a split second.

"I'll see you in a little bit!" Ash called out optimistically before turning around and darting away from them, the barrier standing just as strong even if he wasn't right there.

"Pikachu!" Pikachu cried out to her. "Pi pikapi pi pika pika!" He gave her the thumbs up and ran after his trainer.

"Son of a—!" The string of curses that followed was more than just a bit impressive.

"Misty!" Leaf grabbed her shoulder. "Are you just going to stand there cursing, or are you coming?"

The redhead glared at the empty cavern before them again and then nodded her head. "Yeah. Let's go see what's going on." Even as they started ascending the steep caverns, Misty looked over her shoulder, her stomach twisting painfully.

Something was very wrong with this situation, and she couldn't figure out exactly what.

...

Cerulean City had been lost before anyone even realized what was happening. The border between

Kanto and Johto had been split in two without any opposition. The Indigo League had been massacred, though many tried valiantly to defend it, unable to defeat the legendary birds. The people of Sootopolis City were following in the footsteps of those at Kanto's Pokémon League. Trainers that lived there, trainers that were visiting, young trainers, old trainers, even those that didn't battle competitively all rushed out, trying to stop the two warring legendary Pokémon before they could cause too much destruction.

Serena and Clemont were some of the few that didn't rush into battle. On one hand, both wanted to help stop the Pokémon, but on the other, they didn't want to leave their friends.

Almost as if they read their thoughts, Gary came flying out of the Cave of Origin, Leaf and Misty following him. Serena looked around, unable to hide her confusion. "Where's Ash?"

"He kept going," Misty answered, her voice tinted with anger.

"What the hell?" Gary asked, his eyes taking in the battle before them.

"Groudon just—poofed out of nowhere," Serena explained, twisting her short hair in her hands. "All the lights went out and we felt him walking and then they came back on and there he was. Kyogre attacked him."

"By forcing it to this part of the island, that was really stupid of Kyogre," Leaf muttered, brown eyes scanning the scene almost desperately. "It got itself stuck in a small area."

The water Pokémon let out a shrilling cry of pain as one of Groudon's sharp claws dug into one of its fins. The injured Pokémon managed to blast it back with a powerful torrent of water, though the water was stained by its blood.

Misty narrowed her eyes as she caught sight of a group of trainers nearby. They were releasing their water Pokémon on one side of Sootopolis while there were a lot of grass-types on the other side. "I'm going to see if I can help!" She ran off towards the other group, not caring if anyone recognized her at this point. She didn't want to think about Ash traveling alone beneath them, and she knew that she was going to do if she just stood there. Misty couldn't save Cerulean City, it was gone before she even knew, but she could try to help Sootopolis.

...

Pikachu twitched nervously, shifting closer to Ash's head from his perch on the boy's shoulder. The trainer reached up, scratching the Pokémon's head soothingly.

Pikachu's reactions made Ash a little bit nervous. His mind ran back to meeting Groudon and Kyogre the first time (he didn't really count the fake Groudon that they met prior to that). In retrospect, he was glad that his abilities with Aura weren't unlocked at the time. The amount of pain Pikachu had been in when possessed by the Blue Orb was obvious at the time, but feeling the mental and emotional stress behind it was something Ash wanted no part of.

The Blue and Red Orbs were destroyed, but anything like that left a scar, even if it wasn't a visible one. Ash had half a mind to send Pikachu back up to Misty and the others so that he wouldn't come into contact with anything down in the Cave of Origin, but he knew his friend too well. There was no way Pikachu would go without him.

The air around them was becoming stiflingly hot, making it hard to breathe. He knew that they were almost where they needed to be.

The tunnel opened up into a massive room, the heat so intense that Ash created an Aura Barrier

around him in hopes that it would help keep some of the heat away. It never occurred to him before to test if they could actually do that or not. Either way, they had a job to do and there was no turning back.

Walking into the room itself, he came to the conclusion that the shield protecting him and Pikachu did help. He could actually see the heat rippling in the air, coming from the deep pools of lava. In between them was a narrow rock bridge, leading to a shrine. For a brief moment, Ash wasn't sure if it was actually there or if it was a mirage from the way the heat distorted the image. He could feel the orb though, and knew that he was in the right place.

Ash took a few steps towards the bridge when something big moved behind him. He had been so focused on the orb and the other strange energy rippling around him that he hadn't noticed the most obvious presence of all.

Whipping around, Ash took a few startled steps back when his eyes met Groudon's yellow ones. He took a deep breath when he realized that the Pokémon wasn't attacking him, just staring. The tall, imposing Pokémon nodded his head towards the shrine, giving Ash permission to go.

Glad that he didn't have to fight Groudon in a small cavern filled with lava, Ash sighed in relief and was about to thank it when something occurred to him.

"Wait, if you're here...what's up in the city?"

The cavern shaking answered him, and Groudon looked up at the ceiling. He growled warningly and motioned to the shrine. Ash could feel the urgency coming from him, and knew that something was very wrong. Keeping his barriers up in hopes that they would help him stay balanced on the small bridge (how was that practical?), and keeping one hand on Pikachu, Ash ran over to the shrine. He touched the stone surface and quickly yanked his hand back, hissing as his fingers turned red from the heat. Leaning down a bit, he looked inside and saw a pale brown orb sitting innocently amongst the scalding stone.

Hesitating a bit, Ash slowly reached out with his non-burnt hand, trying to avoid touching the shrine itself with his bare arm. Sweat trickled down his face as he reached the orb, expecting it to be just as searing as everything else, but it wasn't. In fact, it almost felt cold to the touch.

He pulled his arm back, the orb coming with it, light dancing inside of it. The moving light illuminated something on the shrine that Ash hadn't noticed before. He raised it up and looked at the carvings, his eyes growing wide at what he read.

"Pika," Pikachu leaned forward to look at it closer, glancing sideways at Ash. The trainer broke out of his shock, petting the Pokémon with the back of his sore hand as he shoved the orb into one of the pockets on his backpack.

"Now we just have to—" Ash was cut off as the cavern shook violently. He stumbled back onto the stone bridge, alarmed as rocks from the ceiling started falling down into the pools of lava, splashing the hot liquid everywhere. He threw his hand up to block it, pausing for a moment to watch it become solid the second it touched the shield. There was no time to think about that though. Scrambling to his feet, Ash held Pikachu, not wanting him to fall, and ran the rest of the way. A boulder fell, but Groudon hit it away.

The Pokémon growled angrily and put his large hand behind Ash, actually shoving him towards the entrance. The walls around them were starting to crack, tiny streams of water leaking through.

"You need to run too," Ash told the Pokémon, the wrongness and sick feeling welling up within

him again. They all had to get out of there as quickly as possible.

Groudon nodded towards the tunnel, and Ash realized that the Pokémon wasn't going to leave until he did. He bit his lip and closed his eyes for a brief moment before turning around and running back the way he came.

...

No matter how much ice the trainers tried to freeze them in, no matter how many Vine Whips they used to hold them down, nothing could stop the battling legendary Pokémon.

Buildings and homes were crushed under their attacks, but there was a pattern that quickly became obvious to Gary. "Kyogre's trying to avoid hitting the buildings and the people," he said, ducking down to avoid an explosion of steam that rushed over their heads. "Do you see it? She's trying to protect the people too. Groudon though..."

Groudon was absolutely vicious. He didn't seem to care who or what he hit, he didn't hesitate to stab and try to bite Kyogre.

The ground shook under their feet again, and Groudon suddenly backed away from Kyogre. The water-type backed farther into the water that filled the middle of Sootopolis City, eyeing her opponent warily.

Everything was still for a moment. Then Ria, who had been trying to help the best she could, walked forward to look at something in the water. Serena leaned forward, hand pressing against the railing that she was by so that she wouldn't fall. She was curious to see what the Lucario was looking at. There was a massive, dark shadow in the water, creeping towards Kyogre. "What the—is that another one?"

"Another—holy shit!" Gary dropped the Pokéball that he was holding in shock when the water erupted. Another Kyogre launched itself at the injured one, slamming into it and then forcing it up onto the land. The ground shook beneath them as Groudon ran at them, though the second Kyogre dived back into the water, disappearing until they felt something slam into the ground beneath them.

"What the hell is going on?" Leaf yelled. "There can't be two Kyogre! That's impossible!"

"Wait, if there's two of them, what if there's two Groudon too?" Clemont asked, his voice alarmed.

Misty was the one who picked up on why this would be a problem. She gasped and called her Pokémon back into their Pokéballs. Turning, she ran back to the Cave of Origin.

...

It sounded like something exploded beneath Ash's feet. The teenager was thrown forward, slamming into the ground. Pikachu cried out with alarm and they both looked around as the ground behind them collapsed, water rushing through the walls. Yelping, Ash grabbed Pikachu and ran.

"Pikapi! Pi pika chu pi!"

"I know!" Ash yelled back to the Pokémon that was urging him to hurry. It wasn't exactly easy to run uphill when everything seemed to be trying to yank him back down.

He stumbled again as the ceiling directly behind him collapsed, just barely missing him and Pikachu. Shaking his head, Ash grabbed the wall, ignoring the rush of pain that surged from his

burned hand, using that to keep himself upright as he ran. The boy was desperately trying to feel out what was happening, but combined with the strange orange energy that was messing with his Aura, and the fact that there was so much going on all at once, it was almost useless.

That was why he didn't feel the water coming through newly formed cracks and holes.

Pikachu cried out in alarm as he and Ash went flying from the combination of a violent tremor and water breaking through the cave wall. They slammed into the other side, and Pikachu fell from Ash's arms into the water that was rising around them.

The Pokémon shook his head. "Pikapi?" He looked around and saw Ash laying on the floor, eyes closed. "Pikapi!" He ran over and shook his trainer, watching his chest rise and fall, though he didn't wake up. Pikachu sniffed his head for any obvious, bad injuries, but there wasn't anything terrible as far as he could tell. His trainer would wake up.

Pikachu eyed the rising water, terror welling up in him. It didn't matter if Ash would be okay. He was unconscious and wouldn't be able to hold his breath for any amount of time.

Thinking quickly, Pikachu tapped one of the Pokéballs on Ash's belt. There was a flash of light and Greninja appeared. "Pikachu pika pi pika pikapi pika cha cha pi pikachu."

For his part, Greninja took in the situation very quickly. They were lucky enough to land on a slightly raised platform, so the water wasn't at them yet. From the small trickles of water that spilled down the rocks blocking their path, both Pokémon knew that the other side was probably flooding too. Getting the help of Garchomp or Charizard would result in the death of the two Pokémon without a doubt.

Pikachu looked at the Pokéballs again with the intent of letting Sceptile out so that he could help cut through the rocks, when they exploded inward and water rushed in. Greninja grabbed Ash, and Pikachu clung to the Pokémon's shoulder as he swam against the current that was trying to drag them back down. Though Pikachu was focused on holding his breath, movement still caught his attention. He almost gasped in shock, thinking that a log or something was flying at them, but realized that it wasn't just a rigid form.

A strangely coloured Milotic swam around them, urging them forward. Pikachu grabbed onto her instead, and the Pokémon headed up towards the dim light above them that allowed them to see at all.

Greninja was positive that he had never swam so fast in his life. They broke the surface, and Pikachu realized that they were almost to the exit.

"Ash!" The Pokémon looked up as Misty ran over to them.

"Pikachupi!" Pikachu had never been so relieved to see her in his life.

Misty helped tug Ash out of the water, pulling him a few feet away in case it rose a little more. She leaned down over his mouth and nose and then looked at his chest to see if it was moving. Then she felt for a pulse but couldn't find that either. She put her hands one on top of the other, the heel of her palm pressed against the center of his chest and started pushing.

Greninja almost shot forward to help his trainer when they heard a couple of snaps, not sure what the girl was doing, but Milotic got in his way. Pikachu hopped onto her back and shook his head. "Pikachupi pi pika chu chu ch ka pika." Greninja settled down and watched as Misty counted under her breath.

Frustrated, she tilted Ash's head back and pinched his nose. She put her mouth over his and gave two quick breaths, keeping an eye on his chest. She then went back and started the compressions again. To the Pokémon, and to her, it seemed like this went on and on for hours until Ash finally coughed, choking up water. Misty breathed a sigh of relief along with the Pokémon and helped him onto his side so that he wouldn't choke on the water he was trying to expel.

Ash gasped painfully a couple times before he slowly moved, groaning as he moved his torso. Misty reached out, helping him get up a bit more. He looked towards her for a moment. "I thought I told you not to save me?"

Misty let out a watery laugh and leaned forward, closing her eyes and pressing her forehead against his. "Idiot. Of course I'll always run after you. You'd do the same for me." Ash laughed a bit but quickly stopped, groaning at the pain in his chest. The redhead frowned a bit at that. "Sorry, I think I cracked something. It didn't sound too bad though."

"It's okay," he muttered and then looked around. "Greninja? What are you doing out?"

"Nin nin ja greninja," the Pokémon explained, coming over and waving his hands.

Ash's eyes shifted to Pikachu and he smiled. "Good job buddy. Both of you." He hugged both Pokémon close to him, grateful to have them as amazing friends and so proud of them.

"You did good too," Misty rubbed Milotic's head. The Pokémon cooed and nuzzled her, before suddenly looking down and making an unhappy sound. The girl pulled out her Pokéball and called the Pokémon back. She wouldn't be able to move on the land that well. "We need to go."

"Yeah." Ash called Greninja back and Pikachu jumped up onto his shoulder as he stood. He held one of his arms to his chest and nodded his head. They started walking, Misty staying close in case he fell and hurt himself worse. Ash's eyes suddenly went wide. "Misty, Groudon was down below too! The orb was there, I got it, but Groudon was there too!"

"That's what I was worried about," she grimaced. "There's two Kyogre. The second one and the Groudon up there ganged up on the first Kyogre. Then it swam down under the water and we just felt more shaking."

"The water," Ash looked behind them. "What if it's trying to break the walls and let the water in?"

"Why would it do that? Was it trying to stop you?"

"I don't think this has anything to do with me," his voice wavered a bit. "I think it's trying to drown Groudon."

...

"Attention all citizens! Head immediately to the harbour for emergency extraction! This is not a drill!" The announcement blared again and again at people who were corralled towards the docks. Leaf kept looking around in an attempt to see Ash and Misty, but it was futile. She couldn't see them anywhere.

She held Gary's hand with one of hers, Serena's with the other, while Serena completed the chain by holding Clemont's hand. The idea was to make sure that the four of them didn't get separated in the madness. They were given no chance to run back to the Cave of Origin, shoved off by well-meaning adults. They resisted as long as they could, but when the second Kyogre returned to the surface they were forced to move and ended up right in the middle of the people being evacuated.

Ria managed to slip away to look for her trainer and his girlfriend, but that had been a while ago.

"Where are they?" Serena muttered wildly. "Oh Mew, they're going to get stuck here."

"They'll be fine," Clemont tried to assure her, but he didn't sound too confident himself.

"Pika!" The sound caused all four of them to pause and turn around. They were all relieved when Pikachu waved at them over the crowd, and a moment later, Ash made his way through the throngs of people, holding Misty's hand so that they wouldn't get separated.

"Ash! Ria went to look for you!" Gary called out to him.

"I know, I got her!" He caught up to the others.

"Are you guys okay?" Serena asked as she eyed them. They were both soaked, covered in bruises and scratches. Not to mention Ash's breathing sounded a little strange.

"I drowned, Misty saved me, we almost got crushed in a cave in, no big," Ash assured her.

"So just a normal date?" Leaf quipped sarcastically as they inched closer to the boats that were evacuating everyone.

"Something like that," Misty replied dryly. "What's going on here? We got out and they were sending everyone to the docks. Are they just abandoning the city?"

"Better than leaving everyone here with this," the brunette replied as they started moving forward again. "There are two Kyogre and a Groudon attacking each other, it's a good enough reason to skip town for now."

At her words Ash looked around as Groudon burst from the ground, attacking the healthy Kyogre. He looked from one to the other, trying to take in the whole confusing scene. He knew that there were multiples of some legendary Pokémon, though there was always one, the Alpha Legendary, that was always more powerful. That was the original one, the one who appeared in legends from the past. He also knew that there was only one Groudon and Kyogre. He was so distracted by looking at the Pokémon that he wasn't watching where he was going and ended up tripping backwards. His collision with the ground made him lose his breath and hold his ribs, the pain jolting from where Misty had cracked them earlier. He put one hand on the ground to push himself back up but paused. His brow furrowed as he focused for a moment.

Then all the pieces connected together and the shock of that revelation hit him hard. He didn't even realize that Gary and Clemont had grabbed his arms to drag him off of the ground and towards one of the ships. He watched as Kyogre pulled Groudon under the water, watched as the waves caused by the struggling Pokémon slowly diminished. On the land, the other Kyogre let out a single, sad note that sent shivers up everyone's spines. The living Groudon walked over to her as she took her last breath and shoved her back into the water with the other Groudon. Clouds started gathering in the sky as the wind began to pick up, rain starting to fall.

"If that's what happened when a new legendary Alpha Pokémon shows up, I never want to be around it again," Leaf gasped as she sunk down against the deck of the ship as it left the port, not caring how wet she got.

"It wasn't," Ash muttered. He shook his head and pulled his bag off of his back, Pikachu scrambling off of him and onto Misty's shoulder instead. He dug through it, pulling his Pokédex out and going through the different functions.

"What are you doing?" Gary asked him.

"I need to tell Tracey. They need to know."

"Need to know what, Ash? You're not making as much sense as you think you are," Misty told him, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Pikachu tilted his head curiously as he regarded his trainer. His ears twitched and he suddenly looked towards the sky. "Pika?"

Ash opened his mouth to reply but stopped as an enraged shriek filled the air. He looked up, watching a long, green creature streak out of the sky. Rayquaza roared again and flew down close to their ship, looking at them. The Pokémon then rushed towards Sootopolis, a rainbow light surrounding its body, twisting its shape.

"Did Rayquaza just mega evolve?" Gary asked, his mouth falling open.

Ash didn't answer. He watched Rayquaza attack both of the Pokémon, throwing them backwards in opposite directions. It then dove into the water, coming back up moments later and flying back into the sky. While everyone else was watching the third legendary Pokémon fly away, Ash motioned for his friends to look back towards Sootopolis. They all watched as both Groudon and Kyogre vanished.

"What the hell?" Leaf burst out, her eyes going wide.

"That's what I need to tell Tracey," Ash said, shaking his head. "I should have realized before, that orange energy, I've seen it before. I've been trying to figure out why the legendary Pokémon would help Team Rocket but nothing make sense because it doesn't make sense. I'm willing to bet it was the same for the legendary birds and Regigigas and Manaphy too." Ash looked at Misty and Pikachu. "They're Mirage Pokémon."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time!

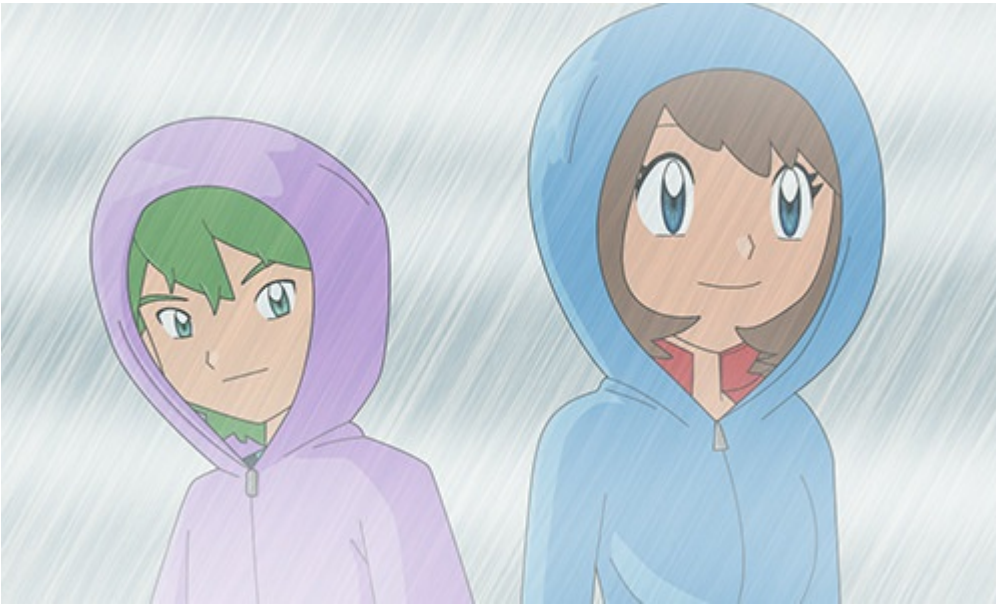
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Edited by: EchidnaPower

Rainfall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The storm came out of nowhere. It started with the wind picking up and clouds covering the once bright blue sky. Then a drizzle began that quickly turned into a massive downpour.

Then the news of Sootopolis hit the internet with shaky videos of Kyogre and Groudon battling, crushing buildings and causing chaos. The news sent May Maple fleeing up to her bedroom without a word to anyone else she was sharing the small cottage with.

The thirteen-year-old shifted, lifting her face out of her pillow and looking out the window. Her hand clenched the fabric, eyes shifting to the aqua shell bracelet that she put on for comfort.

May inhaled sharply, her tears once again rolling down her cheeks. She squeezed her eyes closed and sat up, ripping the bracelet off of her wrist and throwing it as hard as she could across the room. It slammed into her mirror and clattered to the floor.

She heard the sound of footsteps outside of the door, followed by a soft knock. "May, sweetie, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Solidad," she choked out. "Just fine."

"Alright. Just call if you need anything." She walked away and May sank back down into her bed, staring at the bracelet on the floor.

"Did you get Kyogre to do this? Did you ask her to do it?" she whispered, guilt welling up within her again. "Why, Manaphy, why?"

...

Drew looked up as Solidad walked into the room, his bright green eyes flickering to the stairs. Solidad shook her head. "She says she's okay."

"But she's not," he replied, shaking his head.

"She has nothing to worry about in Kanto. Solidad's family is there, so I don't see why May's so upset." Harley flicked his hair back out of his eyes. He was looking at a book, fairly disinterested in whatever it was about.

With such horrible weather outside, they were all cooped up together in the small cottage Solidad was renting. She was in Lilycove to help with the Contest Hall redesign and to act as a judge for the promotional, grand opening contest that the rest of them had planned on participating in.

It didn't look like that was going to be happening anymore.

Drew's eyes narrowed as he looked towards Harley. Solidad spoke up first. "My family is fine Harley. Pewter City hasn't been touched and no one would be interested in them. Cerulean City though..."

"Well we all know whose fault that is."

"Don't." Drew scowled. "The guy who killed thousands of people calling out a teenage girl for causing it? That's crap and you know it. Misty is May's friend. Don't bring it up to her."

The phone rang before a real argument could break out. Solidad was quick to grab her cellphone, answering it as Drew and Harley glared at one another from opposite sides of the table.

"Sure, we can do that," Solidad said after a moment of hushed conversation. "Alright. Okay. Bye." She hung up and looked over to the others. "They're looking for volunteers to help set up beds and things at the Contest Hall. They're going to use it as an emergency shelter. I said we'd go."

"Really?" Harley scowled.

"I'm sure they'd absolutely adore your cookies, you know, for comfort." Harley's eyes lit up at her words and he quickly got up to get the cookies that he had spent the day baking out of boredom.

Solidad shook her head with amusement and looked down at Drew. "Go check with May and see if she wants to come."

Before Drew could even get up, the girl in question entered the room. "I heard you. I want to go."

"Good." The woman smiled. "Get your rain jackets." She turned to go and find hers, tucked away in her room.

Drew eyed May for a moment as he stood up. The girl looked over at him suddenly, frowning a bit. "I'm fine. I just need to go. I need to do something." May shook her head and looked away. "Anything."

"You know what happened isn't Misty's fault, right? And if he blamed her, that means she's probably alive, right?" The green-haired boy put a hand on her shoulder.

May quickly shrugged it off, walking to get her pale blue raincoat and rubber boots, a necessity for the tropical storms that hit Lilycove at that time of year. "I know that. She went to Kalos with Ash's mom to see the finals." May hadn't even heard how Ash had done. Normally after a conference, he called all his friends to talk rather jovially about it, but that year he hadn't made a peep, but not a lot of information came out of that tournament as it was. Shaking her head, May looked back at Drew, who pulled on his pale purple coat. "I just...I think a part of this is my fault."

"What?" Never before had Drew felt so incredulous and perplexed about something. "I know you get strange ideas sometimes, but that's out there even for you."

"I never told anyone. I just wanted to keep her safe. Maybe I should have and this wouldn't have happened. She can ask Kyogre for help so I never even thought..." The brunette shook her head wildly.

"You're not making as much sense as you think you are." Normally, something like that would be followed by a witty statement about how she never made sense, but the situation was too serious for that.

"Manaphy was mine." A bitter smile rose on May's lips. "I hatched her. She called me mama. She was mine." She looked up at him, her eyes glossy. "And she killed thousands of people. I need to go and help them, Drew. I need to do something."

Drew just stared at her, not really understanding how she could blame herself for something a Pokémon did even if she was the one who hatched it. He decided not to argue though, there was no point in that. "We will. We'll make sure all those refugees are taken care of. It's all we can do for now."

May nodded her head in agreement and the two waited in silence for Solidad and Harley.

...

Victory was something that Giovanni relished. It was true, he valued the small victories, but the big ones that came without much opposition were the ones that could be easily enjoyed. Kanto fell into his lap easily, and though there were some problems with people lashing out at Rocket Grunts, they were easily disposed of. None of the Gym Leaders put up much of a fuss, but he still kept them under surveillance. He was not delusional, he knew that not everyone would hail to him so easily. Johto would be the hardest place to gain power, but he knew that when he set his plan in motion. He gave up Johto so that he wouldn't have to spread his forces so far, a move that Champion Lance mirrored by focusing on the other region.

The Kantonian people were very unhappy with the Champion's decision. Not that they were happy with him either, but Giovanni knew that fear was a powerful motivator and manipulation was an amazing tool. With the Kantonian Prime Minister in his pocket and the league non-existent, his takeover of Kanto went smoother than he could have ever anticipated.

That was why, despite his high on his victory, Giovanni was all too prepared for something bad to happen.

"Giovanni, sir." His secretary buzzed through to him. "You have an incoming video call from Aqua and Magma."

"Put them through." Giovanni stroked his Persian's head, receiving a purr from his loyal Pokémon. He waited as the large screen before him flickered to life, revealing a large man with a smaller, more serious woman.

"Yo Gio, our plan went off without a hitch," Matt exclaimed before Giovanni could utter a word.

Courtney rolled her eyes at him and then focused back on the older man. "I can confirm our Kyogre and Groudon successfully managed to defeat the original ones. Their power was far superior, just as you promised."

"Good." Giovanni was beyond pleased with this outcome. "There were no complications?"

At this, Courtney hesitated. "Something strange did happen."

"Huh? What are you—oh yeah!" Matt threw his hands into the air. "Rayquaza showed up after it all. Kind of just shot down from the sky into the water. I think he just went to check on his buddies cause he took off pretty quickly after that. Mega Evolved and blasted ours to bits but who cares, right? They just came back a little while after."

"We anticipated the interference of other legendary Pokémon," Giovanni reminded them, not bothered by that revelation. There were more important things at hand than a grieving Pokémon. "What are your recruitment stats?"

"Better than we anticipated." Courtney looked at a chart in front of her. "There were large turnouts for both of our Teams, but it would appear that you're making quite the impact, sir. There have been many people interested in Team Rocket. The new ones will be shipped off to Sinnoh for training as soon as possible."

"Good. Is there anything else?"

"There is...one thing." Courtney looked almost hesitant. "That kid that escaped in Kalos, the one that was on your list? He was at Sootopolis City too."

Matt snapped his fingers. "Yeah, I saw him too. Black hair? Pikachu?"

She rolled her eyes. "I took pictures. While we were setting everything up, I noticed that he and some of the people with him went into the Cave of Origin. They were sneaking in so they didn't want anyone knowing that they were there. He came out not long before Groudon did. We have no idea what he did down there, but it's something that we're switching some of our resources to."

Giovanni was well aware of who they were talking out, but their reaction surprised him a little bit. "You wish to keep an eye on the boy?"

Matt and Courtney exchanged uncomfortable looks. The girl nodded and said, "Yes sir. He did help bring Archie and Max down."

"Did he now?" The older man's shoulders tensed, his brow furrowing slightly.

"Yes." Courtney looked almost embarrassed. "It's not something people are proud to talk about, having their organization busted by a single Champion and a kid."

Giovanni leaned back in his seat as he contemplated that. Maxie and Archie's pride would have stopped them from talking about the boy before, and the league would have kept his name out of any reports for his protection. It made a lot of sense. He quickly sat up straight again. "Indeed. Keep up the good work and we'll look into potentially getting the codes for another legendary Pokémon each."

"Yes sir."

"Yo that's awesome!" Courtney rolled her eyes and cut the transmission.

Giovanni sat back in silence, staring at the wall. A brush against his leg drew his attention to Persian, the Pokémon's cold eyes looking up into his. "I wonder." He hit the button to talk to his secretary. "Get me Cyrus on the phone. I will be speaking to Ghetsis after as well."

"Yes sir."

The calls were very informative, so much so that Giovanni almost felt foolish when he finally hung up with Ghetsis. It took a lot for the man to admit that he was wrong, but he now knew that he had

made a grave mistake by shrugging off Ash Ketchum. The child had been involved with every Team, working against them to take them down. His timing in Unova made a thought occur to Giovanni.

He hit the button again. "Send Archer in."

A few moments later, one of his Executives walked into the room. Archer was very loyal, and had worked many missions for him in the past. He was a much better candidate to be the successor of Team Rocket over even Giovanni's own son, but Silver always had been a disappointment.

Archer waited patiently as Giovanni pulled up the trainer's license that he had accessed. He motioned to the image and asked, "Do you recognize this boy?" The more Giovanni stared at the boy's face, the stronger the feeling that they had met before raged through him.

"Yes sir," Archer said after a moment. "He looks a little older there, but I recognize him from Unova. He was one of the ones that disrupted our operation."

"And he was never put on our radars?"

"We tried, sir," Archer admitted. "I'm surprised you were able to bring up his information at all. His records were sealed by the league, and we were unable to obtain anything on him. We had a few men working on it, but Proton decided that it was a fool's errand and redirected our resources towards Project Mirage.

"Project Mirage," Giovanni repeated. "Archer, go fetch Doctor Young. He was the one who put Mr. Ketchum's name on our list. I want to know why." The man left with a nod of his head and the boss of Team Rocket once again sat in silence.

He lifted his phone receiver and dialed a number. The person on the other end answered immediately. "Come into my office. I have a new mission for you." He set down the phone without another word and once again waited.

The door opened only moments later, and a young woman with blonde hair walked inside, closing the door behind her. "You need something boss?"

Giovanni took the young woman in and smirked a bit. "You wear that necklace proudly, Domino."

"It's a fine gift, don't you agree?" She touched the circular, silver gemstone that hung around her neck. "Poor Agatha wouldn't have wanted it to be destroyed."

"I'm sure." He decided to get right to business, since there was no time to wait. "As I said, I have a mission for you. It would appear that there has been some information that we've misplaced or was mishandled. This is unacceptable. I'd like you to put all the pieces together. To do this though, you're going to have to go undercover."

"I can do that." Domino smirked. "Where will I be going and who am I going to be?"

"You're going to assume the role of a young trainer who wishes to help aid in the effort against Team Rocket in Blackthorn City."

...

The air was so hot that Tracey could actually see it sweltering in front of him as he hurried from the Blackthorn City Gym towards the Dragon's Den. There was no time to worry about that though.

To most people, the Dragon's Den only seemed to have one layer to it since it was so hard to get to as it was. What those people didn't know was that not only did the building have several stories beneath it, it also had tunnels that made it easier to get in and out. It definitely beat trying to navigate around the whirlpools that plagued the watery moat around the structure.

Getting inside, Tracey made his way down to the large room that they were using almost as a war room. Just the thought made unpleasant shivers run up his spine. Having been a Kanto citizen for several years now, Tracey knew all about the civil war that plagued the region years ago. Spanning from when Professor Oak was only a young boy to when he was a young man, it was said to have been one of the worst, bloodiest conflicts that ever plagued the region to the point where the cities that were once beyond the Silver Mountain Chain were completely destroyed. The mountains were what separated the north army and the south army, and in their quest to liberate themselves into their own region, Northern Kanto attacked Southern Kanto, who fought back viciously. Now all that was left was ruins beyond the mountains.

That was the war that nearly destroyed a generation, Professor Oak's generation. Tracey silently prayed that something like that wouldn't happen again, but it looked more and more likely with every passing day.

Tracey was a bit surprised to see that Brock was already there. Seeing the charts and maps that were on the wall though, the green-haired man remembered that they were going over the intricate tunnel system that ran through the Silver Mountains and even through some of the Kanto cities, including Pewter. If they could access these tunnels that were widely unknown, they'd be able to sneak into Kanto without Team Rocket knowing.

"Hey Trace," Brock said as he tried to organize the papers in front of him. "What are you doing here so early?"

He looked around the room to see who else was there. Seeing that only Lance, Professor Oak and Green were there, Tracey decided it was safe to talk.

Even though Gym Leaders and the Elite Four members from Johto had arrived the previous day, bringing along others that they claimed were trustworthy, everyone was still being a bit skeptical. It was hard to really do anything when no one trusted each other.

"The legendaries that Team Rocket are using." He wet his lips. "Ash thinks they're Mirage Pokémon."

That made everyone else halt what they were doing to look at him. Lance raised an eyebrow at him. "Mirage...how would you know?"

"Just in case, I made it so that any message that Ash sent from his Pokédex would come to me." Professor Oak scowled a bit. "What? It would have got lost in the thousands of other ones that come in all the time. No one's going to think to look at my own personal things."

"Let me see the message." Lance motioned towards the laptop that he had with him. Tracey walked over and logged in, hauling up the message that came as an email. It was sort and to the point, since only small messages could be sent. "Teams working together. Legendaries are Mirage Pokémon." The Champion looked up. "You're sure Ash sent this?"

"Either that or someone who knew to send me a message, who also happens to know about Mirage Pokémon, took it."

The second that the words 'Mirage Pokémon' were spoken, Brock's entire body tensed up. "How

can that be possible? The Mirage System was destroyed!"

"And Doctor Young was arrested," Professor Oak added.

"What are Mirage Pokémon?" Green asked, completely left out.

"Simply put, they're fake Pokémon that are generated by a complex program and system so that they can physically interact with others. Not only that, but they can be programmed to know any move and they're much more powerful than their real counterparts," the old man explained. He rubbed his chin and glanced over at Lance again. "If Ash is correct, this means that the Legendary Pokémon did not take Team Rocket's side."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Green asked. She was the only one with an outside perspective on this topic, since Tracey had been told firsthand accounts of everything that happened from Professor Oak, Ash, Misty, Brock, May and Max before.

"Not if these Mirage Pokémon are stronger than them," Oak answered.

Lance remained silent during the exchange. He grasped his pink hair tightly and shook his head. "Son of a bitch!" They all jumped at his sudden outburst. "I knew that we should have had more people looking for him. I bet most of them were Team Rocket too..."

"What are you talking about?" Brock stared at the Champion warily.

"Only weeks after we arrested him, someone broke Young out and he's been a ghost ever since."

"I never heard anything about that," Professor Oak said. He crossed his arms in front of him and looked so unimpressed that it made Lance feel a bit ashamed.

"No, you wouldn't have. We kept that under wraps so panic wouldn't spread."

"So you just let people go on with their lives when a psychotic mass murderer was wandering around?"

"There's probably more of those around than we think," Green toned in. She sounded almost bored.

"Doesn't matter. He escaped, and he apparently made this system bigger and badder than ever, right?" The men around her all nodded. "Okay. There are a few other things I want to know. What did Ash mean by the teams working together, and how would he have figured any of this out?"

How Ash would have figured out that they were Mirage Pokémon was easy, but Brock, Tracey and Professor Oak decided to stay mum on that part. All he would have needed to do was get close enough to one. Her other point was just as worrisome as the idea of Mirage Pokémon though.

"It means, I'm going to need to talk to the other Champions." Lance stood up and walked out of the room abruptly, his cape swishing behind him.

Waiting until he was behind another closed door, the Kanto-Johto Champion sighed and shook his head. "Damn it Red, you called it and I didn't listen. None of us did."

...

Wallace stood at the edge of what was once the Sootopolis City Gym, rain and wind whipping dangerously in the sky. This place that had once been his own before he moved on to what he thought was greater aspirations. It was true, he had come farther than anyone ever expected him to. Lance might have been unique by being the Champion of two regions, but he was unique as well.

He was a renowned, Top Coordinator with his own contest cup, and on top of that, he was the Hoenn Champion. No one before him had ever come out on top of both worlds before. Juan was nowhere to be found, and his once beautiful gym was in ruins.

His phone buzzed and he looked down at it, sighing as he ignored the text from his niece Lisia. The sweet girl was becoming a very popular Contest star in her own right, and he didn't want to dim her bright enthusiasm. She didn't deserve to find out that her mother, his sister, had perished in the battle at Sootopolis.

The sound of crunching footsteps caught his attention, and the green-haired man looked around. "Steven."

"The casualties were really minimal," Steven Stone said as he came to a stop at his side. "By choosing to evacuate the island, you saved thousands of lives."

"I know," Wallace agreed. "I just wish I could have done more. My sister was one of the people lost. Lisia's mother."

"I'm sorry," Steven put a hand on his shoulder. There was nothing else he really could say. Instead, he looked around. "I just wish I understood. I mean, I dealt with Kyogre, Groudon and Rayquaza months ago too when they were fighting, but this...this was different."

"The reports said there was more than one of each," Wallace shook his head. "That's not possible. So something else is going on here." The Champion looked towards his longtime friend. "This probably sounds strange, but I just know this has something to do with Team Rocket."

Steven nodded in agreement, looking none too happy about the idea. "Looks like you're going to have to get in touch with Lance after all."

"I can hardly contain my excitement." Wallace sighed. "You remember what happened the last time he was brought in?"

"Of course I do. I was the Champion back then and I let him kick me out of my own investigation. We won't let the same thing happen this time around. You put me in charge of the G-Men in your stead, and I won't let him push us out again."

The current Champion of Hoenn laughed almost bitterly. "I asked you to do this because this should still be you."

"What should?" Steven looked entirely perplexed about the other man's statement.

"You were always more cut out to be a Champion than I was. I didn't understand what I was getting into no matter how much you warned me. I wish I had listened." He looked at the gym. "I wish I had done a lot of things differently."

"No." Steven shook his head. "You're a good Champion. Delegating to others is a strength, not a weakness." He paused in thought. "I've dealt with my fair share of things, but this is something else all together. This type of situation, it brings out the worst of people, but it also brings out the best. This is what's going to create the Champions and leaders of the future. People who can deal with this type of thing. Someone who can be the Champion that everyone truly needs. They're out there right now."

Wallace thought about that for a moment. "I hope you have some idea about who we're going to be looking for, because none are coming to me."

A very small smile passed across the young man's face. "I can think of a few."

...

"Oh you poor dear you look dreadful, here, have one of my homemade cookies."

"Thank you, these are absolutely delicious."

"Well of course they are. My baked goods are nothing less than spectacular. Oh deary!"

Drew pushed the hood of his raincoat out of his face, eyeing Harley oddly. The young man was practically dancing around from person to person, offering them food and 'comfort'. Of course, the comfort only came if they praised his cookies, otherwise they just ended up in his book.

"Oh Harley," Solidad laughed a bit from his other side as she helped unload more towels and blankets from a delivery truck. They were wrapped in thick plastic so that they wouldn't get wet and defeat the purpose.

"I can't believe he's just trying to get people to say they like his cookies in a situation like this."

"He means well and you know that." She frowned a bit as she looked over his shoulder. "She's crying again."

Drew looked over in the direction that Solidad nodded to. He frowned as he caught sight of May. The teenager had been working almost non-stop since they got there earlier that day. The volunteers were all on shifts so that no one would get exhausted or injured from the rain, but May took no heed of that and kept working. Drew followed her lead, if only to keep an eye on her.

In a way, Drew understood why she wanted to keep herself busy and help. A part of her mind, twisted by grief and unwarranted guilt, thought that this was partially her fault. He didn't know a thing about her owning a Manaphy outside of her earlier reveal that she had one at some point of time, but the Pokémon's actions were throwing her off. Not to mention the whole situation was upsetting for everyone in general.

"Hey," he spoke up as he approached the brunette. "You were the one who wanted to stay and now you're slacking?"

May brushed away her stray tears and glared up at him through the icy rain. "I'm slacking? You've just been standing around watching Harley."

"It's kind of hard not to." Drew looked back at the older coordinator with disdain. Another ship had just docked moments before, and the purple-haired man was pulling out another batch of cookies as people were ushered into the rapidly filling Contest Hall. The Pokémon Center and hotels were all booked up, and Drew wasn't really sure where they were going to get everyone else to go.

May gasped, startling him a bit. He looked around quickly just in time to see a streak of pale blue – just like the raincoat that she wore – rush by him. Pushing his green hair out of his eyes, Drew watched as May skidded a bit on the soaked grass, tackling two people at the same time. "Oh Mew." He hurried down after her, fully-ready to apologize to whoever it was, but came to a stop when he recognized the people May tackled. "Ash? Misty?" Pikachu was standing on the ground beside them, looking terribly amused.

"Hey Drew," Ash replied tiredly as he loosely hugged May. "It's nice to see you, May, but I kinda got a broken rib so could you—?"

"I'm sorry!" She got up but slipped again, ending up on the wet dock beside them. She turned her attention to Misty and hugged her again. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"As sweet as this is, you're blocking the road." May looked up, blinking with surprise at an older girl that she didn't recognize. "We should probably move."

"I wouldn't mind going somewhere out of this rain," another girl with dark blonde hair added, rubbing her bare arms. The boy with glasses beside her looked like he was going to reach out and put his hand on her shoulder, but hesitated. The only other person May recognized (and only from pictures) was Gary Oak, who nudged the blond boy teasingly.

May stood up, helping Misty to her feet. Drew held out a hand to Ash, who blinked with surprise but then smiled, grabbing his hand and allowing the younger boy to help him up. Drew hid it well, but he was instantly taken back by how tall Ash had gotten. The other boy was two years older than him, but they had been roughly the same height the last time they met. Pikachu hopped up onto Ash's shoulder again.

"I can't believe you're all here!" May once again threw her arms over Ash and Misty's shoulders, tugging them and Pikachu into a group hug. The smile on her face was so wide and genuine, that it made Drew smile a bit. "Right, right you guys are going to get sick if you stay out here. Um..." She looked around almost helplessly.

Shaking his head, the green-haired boy said, "We could go back to the cottage. I'm sure Solidad wouldn't mind."

"I won't mind what?" The woman in question came up behind May, adjusting her pink raincoat a little bit.

"Hi Solidad," Ash said with an exhausted smile.

The pink-haired woman regarded Ash and the group with him curiously. "You all look like you swam here."

May smiled at the woman sweetly. "That's why we were hoping you wouldn't mind if they came back to the cottage with us."

"Of course," Solidad nodded her head. "Harley might complain, but just ignore him." She looked around at Drew. "I need to stay here for a little while, but you can all go ahead since your shifts ended over an hour ago." The woman motioned behind her. "Go on, get out of here."

"What's going on here?" Harley interrupted. "Did you fin—you." Harley stared at Misty angrily.

Misty glared back at him. "Me."

Ash looked from Misty to Harley and back again, not sure if he should try to shield her a little more. Misty could take care of herself, but this was Harley and he wasn't known for being fair. Pikachu mimicked his confused expression, not sure if he should shock the man or not. It would probably be a bad idea in that weather.

"You know how easy it is to get in Harley's book," May said to Ash. "Literally. They met in Johto."

Ash regarded the two for a moment and shook his head. It came as absolutely no surprise to him that his girlfriend didn't get along with Harley. Now that he thought about it, pretty much everything that he remembered about Harley was bound to get on her nerves. Ash reached out,

putting a hand on her shoulders to break the glaring contest. She blinked and looked over to him, smiling and then taking a few steps back so that she was beside him, and resumed glaring at the purple-haired man.

"Don't you have more people to bother?" Drew asked Harley, raising an eyebrow.

"I am providing comfort to the poor dearies that need it," the man said, clearly offended. He fixed his Cacturne raincoat and sashayed away from them, cookies in hand.

"Who was that?" Clemont asked Ash warily.

"Long story," he muttered.

"Come on, we'll show you how to get to Solidar's," May urged them, taking a few steps forward. "You can introduce us on the way."

The thought of being out of the never-ending downpour was something that appealed to everyone, and they were all quick to follow May and Drew away from the Lilycove Contest Hall.

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Lightning streaked across the sky as the wind whipped the heavy rain in their faces. They still managed to get introductions in.

Though May and Drew had raincoats, even they were soaked by the time they reached the cottage that they were staying at. To say that Ash, Pikachu, Misty, Gary, Leaf, Clemont and Serena were all drenched from head to toe would have been an understatement. All six of them were sore, hungry and completely tired. None of them really had it in them to explain anything.

"Wait here," May urged them when they got inside of the cottage. She hung up her drippy coat and kicked off her shoes, running into the house despite her sopping jeans. Drew shook his head and hung his purple rain coat up beside her blue one. He looked around as May skidded back, sliding over the hardwood floor with her wet socks. She held out her arms with a ton of towels. "Here. Don't wanna get Solidar's place all messed up. There's only one shower though, so you'll have to take turns."

"I'd use it quick to get you all through," Drew added as he looked outside. "The power's been flickering on and off since this storm came out of nowhere."

"Can we at least go somewhere to change while we wait?" Leaf asked, wringing out her soaked hair.

"Oh, sure," May blushed, embarrassed that she didn't think about it first. "Someone can go in the shower and everyone else can use the bedrooms to change." Her face twisted unpleasantly. "Uh, maybe not Harley's room." She looked over at Drew.

He shook his head, a small smile appearing on his face. "She's probably right. Solidar's room is right down there, some people can use mine and some can use hers."

Serena threw her hand up into the air. "I call the shower first." After being stuck on a ship for a while, everything that happened in Sootopolis City, and once again being stuck on a ferry in the pouring rain, she felt really disgusting. It was to the point where she didn't even feel embarrassed about being so forward.

May smiled warmly and said, "Alright, follow me!" She looped her arm through the blonde girl's

and practically dragged her up the stairs.

Ash muttered something quietly to Misty, who nodded her head and started walking towards Solidad's room. "Pikachu and I will wait to switch with her." Drew just nodded his head and motioned for everyone else to follow him up the stairs.

The second floor wasn't very big with three small rooms and a bathroom, but it was enough for them. They could all hear May pattering around in the bathroom, talking enthusiastically to Serena. Drew motioned to the door opposite of the one the two girls were behind and said, "That's May's room. You can go in there...Fern?"

The three teenagers were silent for a moment before a bark of a laugh escaped Gary's lips. "Oh god. Fern."

"Leaf," the girl in question repeated, her unimpressed glare locking on Drew.

"Sorry. Leaf. You can use May's room." She nodded and walked in. "This is Harley's room. Like May said earlier, I'd avoid that. You guys can change in my room."

May walked out of the bathroom, looking far more amused than Drew had seen her in a while. "We couldn't figure out how to get the shower taps to work right."

Rolling his green eyes, he nodded to her room. "Leaf's getting changed in there."

"Fern," Gary snickered and Clemont nudged him. They both walked into the room Drew had motioned for them to go into.

"So, what do you think?" he asked May after a moment of silence. A lot had happened in the past hour with very little chance to actually process it.

Her smile dropped and she crossed her arms in front of her. "I think that it's not a coincidence that they were on Sootopolis when it all went to hell."

Drew stared at her, biting his lip slightly. "What, you think that Misty...?"

"No!" May's eyes went wide in horror at the suggestion. "No, not at all. It's just...it's never a coincidence." She looked to the floor, wringing her hands together. "It never was." Her fingers trailed along the edge of her seashell bracelet. "

"That's ominous."

"Huh?"

"You know the whole school thing you're supposed to be keeping up with? I did your courses last year, I know you should know what that means." It was actually relieving to see that stubborn scowl cross her features.

May crossed her arms and lifted her nose in the air. "I'm getting changed." She turned and walked to her room, knocking on the door and calling out to Leaf, who let her in.

Drew stared at the closed door for a moment, a frown crossing his features. It was great to see May being more like her old, vibrant self, but a sinking feeling hit him. The positivity wasn't going to stay long, he just knew it.

...

Misty stretched out as she pulled her yellow pajama shirt on, wincing slightly at a sharp sting in her side. She looked down, frowning a bit at the long, thin scrape on her side. It wasn't bleeding, but a little bit of blood did well up under the skin, and it stung horribly.

A pained gasp from behind her caught her attention. She spared a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure that Ash was decent. Neither one of them were shy about changing in the same room, but they still respected the other's privacy and faced opposite directions.

Still, the gasp worried Misty, and she spared a look over her shoulder towards where her boyfriend was. The girl raised an eyebrow, watching him struggle to get his wet shirt over his head. Pikachu was sitting on the edge of Solidad's bed, watching his trainer with worried eyes.

"Dork," Misty said with a shake of her head. "Stop struggling, you'll hurt yourself even more." She grabbed the edge of his wet collar that was stuck at the base of his neck, pulling it over the rest of the way. Ash smiled at her sheepishly once he could see again, still holding his ribs.

Misty's smile fell when she saw the faint bruise on his chest. "That must hurt. Sorry about that."

"You're not allowed to apologize for saving my life," he deadpanned. All things considered, he was lucky. Most drowning victims would have had to go to the hospital anyway to get their lungs and chest checked, but he could already breathe fine again. Maybe it had something to do with being the Chosen One, he didn't know.

"Pi pikachu," Pikachu agreed with him.

Misty frowned as she watched him dig through his bag and pull out a dark blue t-shirt. He tried to shrug it on but ended up wincing again. "Uh, do you think you could—?"

The girl rolled her eyes and helped him pull the garment on so that he wouldn't twist or strain anything. Ash smiled at her when he got it back on, but then frowned a bit at her expression.

"What's wrong?" There were a hundred ways that she could answer that question, but he meant right there in that moment.

"It's always water," she said after a moment of struggling to get any sort of thought out. Ash tilted his head slightly at that comment. "I grew up with water, I've never been afraid of the pool or the ocean, even if it's raging. But it took my sisters away, my other Pokémon, and it almost took you too. Is it just going to take everything away?" She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Sorry, I'm being ridiculous."

"I don't think so." Misty opened her eyes and looked up at Ash, who wasn't staring at her, but out the window at the raging storm thoughtfully. "I just..." He couldn't really think of anything to say that would be a comfort to her. Ash could easily say that it would be okay that they'd beat Giovanni, that everything in the long run would be okay, but he had no idea how to approach the topic of losing her sisters. "I don't know what to say without making it worse." It made him feel miserable that he couldn't comfort someone he dearly cared for.

The redhead smiled slightly and shook her head. She closed the distance between them, hugging him gently because of his sore ribs. Misty had the side of her face against his chest. "A hug works too."

A smile similar to her own appeared on Ash's face and he hugged her close, not caring if it caused him any discomfort. A little physical pain was nothing, it would heal.

It didn't occur to him until later that she was listening to his heartbeat.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Connecting The Pieces

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



With the storm raging overhead, Solidaridad and Harley were stuck somewhere else for the night. Always the responsible adult, Solidaridad had called them, giving Drew clear instructions to make sure everyone was fed and to head to the basement. Lilycove was no stranger to storms, and as such, all buildings were reinforced with heavy storm doors and windows, as well as safe basements. That's exactly where the woman wanted them to go until the storm died out.

Making food for eight hungry teenagers was no easy feat, but with the combined manpower of May, Drew, Clemont and Serena, they were able to pull something together. While this was going on, Ash, Misty, Gary and Leaf released the Pokémon, one team at a time as to not overcrowd the small living room, to feed them. In their Pokéballs, Pokémon could go quite some time without food, but they were stronger and more alert when fed more often.

Once the food was ready and the Pokémon were fed and put back into their Pokéballs, everyone retreated to the basement.

That was when May and Drew both insisted on hearing the story about what was going on. Ash, Misty, Clemont, Serena, Gary and Leaf all took turns talking, adding little details that the others missed while talking.

"...And that's when you tackled Ash and Misty to the ground and here we are," Leaf finished off as she set her empty plate aside.

May and Drew exchanged looks. He was wary of the whole thing and was slightly surprised to see that she only looked a little confused herself. The girl pursed her lips slightly before asking, "Okay, but why were there two Groudon and Kyogre?" In his rush to get through the basics, Ash had just shrugged that fact off with an 'I'll explain later' but never actually got back to it.

"Groudon and Kyogre? They were—oh—oh!" Ash had been laying out on the floor, resting his sore body and hoping that his ribs were already starting to heal. He jerked up into a sitting position quickly, staring at May with wide eyes. "Manaphy!"

May's expression fell, her shoulders slumping. "I know." Her eyes darted to Misty and then to the

floor, unable to look her in the eyes. "I heard about what Manaphy did."

"But Manaphy didn't do it!" Ash said excitedly. May's head snapped up, sapphire eyes wide. "One of the Groudon and Kyogre were Mirage Pokémon. I'd bet you anything, even Pikachu, that the other Pokémon Team Rocket are using are Mirage Pokémon." Pikachu didn't look offended at all, completely on board with his trainer's conclusion.

"A...it wasn't...it wasn't her?"

"It wasn't her." Ash smiled broadly at her.

A thousand questions ran through May's mind at that moment. How could they have been Mirage Pokémon? Why did they fight with the real versions? How were they there? What were Ash and his friends doing there to begin with? None of that mattered at the moment though.

May laughed loudly and threw herself at Ash, hugging him tightly. She ripped away from him just as quickly, practically launching up the steps and ignoring everyone's cries for her to come back. She ignored the crashing thunder and flashing lightning as she rushed up to her room. Once she was inside, she fell to her knees on the floor.

She picked up her bracelet made of aqua shells. May hugged it close to her chest, eyes watering again. "Manaphy, I'm so sorry I doubted you. A Mirage Pokémon. Of course it was. I— wait...Mirage. Oh no. Oh Mew." Once again jumping to her feet, she retreated back to the basement, her bracelet in hand.

May was relieved when no one questioned her upon her return. She flopped back to the floor and stared at Ash seriously. "Sorry, I was just excited, but...how could they be Mirage Pokémon? I mean, you explained what happened to you, but it doesn't add up."

Ash opened his mouth to reply when a loud crash from above and the lights flickering distracted him. They all looked towards the ceiling.

A small nudge drew Serena's attention from the ceiling, down to Clemont. "The storm should be over by morning, at least that's what they were saying last I checked."

"Hopefully," Serena agreed, setting her own plate out of the way. "It doesn't even seem like a natural one."

"It's probably not," Gary piped up. He hadn't really been paying attention to the end of the story, or May's sudden outburst and questions. Instead, he was focused on the map spread out in front of him. "They killed Kyogre and Groudon. Mess with legendary Pokémon, and the whole world messes up. It's why people shouldn't catch them at all."

"Only hurting or catching the Alpha ones messes things up," Ash corrected as he flopped back, angling himself so that his head fell onto Misty's leg rather than the floor. Pikachu was quick to curl up on his stomach. "Guess it doesn't matter. Kyogre and Groudon were one of a kind."

Drew observed the raven-haired teenager warily. In many ways, he felt largely left out of something here, even more so than May if her outburst was any indication. She didn't seem shocked by anything they said. Mildly surprised would have been the better description. She was onto something though when she asked about things not adding up. "You guys know what's going on, don't you?" All eyes turned to him. "With Team Rocket. Team Aqua. Team Magma? You know something. And what are Mirage Pokémon?"

"We have no idea what the Teams are actually doing," Leaf answered bluntly. "We know that the

endgame is probably to rule the regions or whatever but we were told that their power and allies stretched farther than we thought. Guess that's true."

"If Team Aqua and Magma are working together, and with, or for, Team Rocket, there's a pretty good chance that the others might be involved too," Gary agreed.

"Maybe not Plasma," Ash added. "They didn't get along at all, last I saw."

"Times change. I bet those fake legendary Pokémon have something to do with it."

"I'm curious about that too," Clemont agreed. "You haven't explained the Mirage Pokémon to any of us yet."

Misty sat up, a fiery scowl marring her features. "Mirage Pokémon were something created by a sick asshole. They're data made real or something like that. The asshole designed them to be stronger than the real ones and they can learn any move at all. He just programmed them in."

"I thought he was arrested though," May piped up, her fingers dancing along her bracelet.

"With what's happening in Kanto, it wouldn't surprise me if some undercover Rockets got him out ages ago," the redhead replied bluntly.

"How can you tell when something's a Mirage Pokémon or not?" Drew wondered, still a bit skeptical about the whole thing. Everyone else seemed to accept the strangeness of this whole situation, but he didn't even really understand what Mirage Pokémon were.

Ash looked towards the ceiling in thought. "It's hard to explain. Mirage Pokémon are made from this really weird, really wrong energy. When I was younger it really messed with me. I could feel it when we were at Sootopolis but I didn't realize what it was. Anyway, when we first saw them, they were a little faint, like the colours weren't all there."

"That's right," May interjected quickly. "And they almost looked like they were a bit fuzzy or glowing."

"Yeah," Ash agreed. "I guess they fixed that."

"Mirage Pokémon can only move within the Mirage Field. They need these special devices for that to happen, but once those are set up they can move freely in them. They're controlled by a remote and can learn any attack." Misty looked towards the group and shook her head. "Like I said before, they're naturally stronger than the real versions. Young was working on a portable version of his hell-lab."

Ash froze at the mention of the lab specifically. His shoulders tensed as he remembered Misty, younger with her hair still in her side pony-tail, falling over the side of the stone catwalk they were on. He remembered thinking that she was dead and there was nothing he could do about it. His hand moved, brushing against her hand and then clasping it tightly.

It was just a memory, she was alright and still there with them.

"So Mirage Pokémon are programs come to life?" Drew clarified, eyes narrowing slightly. "And Team Rocket's controlling it."

"I bet they gave Magma and Aqua use of Groudon and Kyogre if they allied with them," Leaf realized. "That'd be a way to make them agree, especially if Team Rocket could take them away."

"They could create any Pokémon then," May pointed out.

"Unless they can't," Clemont said, realizing where Leaf was going with this. "I'm trying to understand the technology just from what you guys are saying, but it sounds so advanced. It must have its limitations though. Otherwise they'd use all the legendaries all over the place."

"A one-fell-swoop takeover instead of this slower one," Gary grumbled.

"Well, maybe they can't," Serena suggested, blushing a bit when everyone looked at her. "Maybe they can only use one at a time or they need something special to use a specific one. Like playing a game that you need an actual disc or cartridge for."

"That would explain a lot," Clemont agreed with her, smiling with pride.

"There's still something I don't get," Drew spoke up again, turning his attention back to Ash. "You were talking about how you could feel the difference with Mirage Pokémon or something like that. How's that possible?"

Ash frowned for a moment before it occurred to him that Drew had no idea that he could use Aura. May had always been a fiercely loyal friend, and she never would have spilled the beans on that if he didn't want her to.

He looked around at his friends before slowly nodding his head. "Get in a circle."

"Wha—?"

"You'll see." Everyone scooted close together in a circle. Still holding Misty's hand, he reached out with his free one and grabbed May's. "Everyone hold hands."

"Why?"

"Something Riley showed me. I never tried it with a group like this before. Just Misty, Mom and Brock." He waited as everyone slowly linked hands. "Awesome. Now close your eyes." Most of them looked at him skeptically. "Trust me."

One by one, everyone closed their eyes, Ash being the last to do so. He took a deep breath and concentrated. He could feel his Aura reaching out across his friends, running from one hand to the next, and at the same time, the pale blue outlines that he normally tuned out became very obvious.

Ash opened his eyes again, still able to see everything. From what Riley had told him a long time ago, no one else would be able to see with their eyes closed, so they really had no idea what he was doing yet. "Open your eyes."

Misty was the only one there who knew what he was doing. This was something that she helped him practice when he was home both after Sinnoh and Unova. At first, she was a bit worried because she could remember how tired it made him just to let her see the world the way he did, let alone six other people at the same time. Then she remembered that he was much stronger now.

"What the hell?" Gary's shocked question summed up everyone's thoughts perfectly.

"Don't let go!" Ash warned them, realizing that Drew almost jerked away from May's grasp in surprise. "It'll break it for everyone."

"Is this how you see everything?" Clemont asked in awe as he looked around.

"I tune it out most of the time and don't notice it, but yeah. This is what I see." Ash leaned back to look at Drew. "This is how I know. The Mirage Pokémon look orange, not blue."

"What is this?"

"Aura," Ash explained. "I found out a few years ago that I could use it."

"Like the Aura Guardians?"

"Exactly like them," he agreed with a nod of his head before frowning. "Not that there's any left anymore. But this is how I know."

"We're all different colours," Serena noted as she looked from one person to the next with interest.

"Yeah, everyone looks a little different," Ash agreed. "Feels different too but I can't show you that. There's a tiny bit of the basic light blue in everyone though." His smile fell. "Sometimes they're not very nice to see or feel though."

"You have a little more yellow." They all looked at Misty, and the girl blushed a bit. "Sorry, it's just..." She nodded at her boyfriend. "Your Aura used to be a lot bluer." She was referring to the rich blue that she saw the first time he managed to do this correctly. "There's more yellow to it now."

"Yeah, I know." He smiled at her. "Yours has more blue to it too."

"Wait." Leaf looked from one to the other. "You're changing each other's, aren't you?"

"Anything that can change who you are can change your Aura," Ash explained. "Different personalities show up differently and everyone is unique. Mirage Pokémon though...they feel wrong."

"Pikapi," Pikachu spoke up from where he had been silently listening to the story. "Pika chu pika ka."

"You're right." Ash let go of May and Misty's hands, and the brilliant lights faded from everyone's vision, leaving the world a little darker than before. Ash groaned, leaning forward and pressing his hand to his forehead. Pikachu jumped up on his shoulder and patted his head while Misty rubbed his back.

"Are you okay?" May asked from his other side.

"Fine, just takes a few minutes for things to go back to normal," Ash assured her, thought he kept his eyes closed.

"So you can use Aura, and you're on some sort of mission to collect some sort of fancy orbs or save the world from Team Rocket, who is pairing up with other teams and can control fake but more powerful legendary Pokémon. Did I get that right?" Drew asked, wanting to be clear on everything.

"Is now a bad time to tell you that the reason we started trying to collect the orbs is because Arceus came to me in a dream and told me we had to help him by finding the spheres to bring somewhere to do something and it has to be me to get them because I'm his Chosen One?" Ash asked in one breath, still holding his hands over his eyes.

Drew stared at him. "Tauros-shit."

"Drew!" May smacked his arm.

"He's telling the truth," Serena said, crossing her arms in front of her and glaring at the other boy. "We've met a ton of legendary Pokémon that have needed help."

"It's how I met Manaphy," May added.

Misty snapped her fingers and whispered to Pikachu. The Pokémon nodded and scurried over to Ash's bag and dug through it before finding what he was looking for. Managing to hold them both in his paws, Pikachu walked over to Drew and held the orbs out to Drew.

He eyed the glass spheres that they mentioned briefly in their summary of everything that had happened so far. Carefully, he took them from the Pokémon and turned them over in his hands. "I don't see what's so special about them."

"Give them to May," Misty instructed.

Shrugging, Drew handed them to his friend, who stared at them in awe. Ash finally looked up from his hands, shaking his head a bit before he turned to watch them. Realizing what was going on, Ash took the orbs from May, and the second that his skin made contact with the smooth surfaces, light started dancing within them.

"Is that because of your Aura?" Drew asked after a moment.

"Yeah, and because I'm the only one that can do this. Arceus says that there's something we're missing, something that's bigger than what we thought was happening and me getting him all of these orbs that were hidden from him will help. I don't know why he needs them, but it can't be any worse than what's happening right now."

"Especially if Gary's right and they're trying to replace the legendaries with the fakes," Leaf sighed. "Look how bad this storm is. If they keep messing with the Pokémon, it's just going to get worse."

"This is..." Drew laughed and shook his head. "This is absolutely ridiculous. Oh, I believe you." He held up his hands to May, who looked like she was about to yell at him. "Still ridiculous though. Team Rocket is raging a political war and takeover using fake legendary Pokémon, the other Teams joining in, and the best solution is to run around and collect some fancy Christmas lights to give to Arceus so he can save the world." He ran a hand through his green hair. "What kind of plan gets so out of hand that the god that created everything needs to stop it?"

Lightning struck overhead, and Ash's brow furrowed. His eyes turned towards the ceiling and his expression slowly morphed as puzzle pieces that should have been obvious to him a while ago started clicking together. First it was realization, and then horror. "Arceus."

"What about Arceus?" Gary asked.

He looked at the others. "The only reason Team Rocket took over so quickly was because of the legendary Pokémon. The mirage ones. If they didn't have them there's no way they could have pulled this off. The actual legendary Pokémon wouldn't help them. What if that's the point?"

"Are you...are you suggesting that they're getting rid of the originals on purpose?" Leaf clarified. "And what...replacing them with the fakes that they can control?" Her tone of voice made it clear that she already knew his answer.

"I know what I said about catching the Alpha Legendaries but killing them." Ash actually felt sick at the thought. "What if that is what they're doing though?"

"It won't work though," Misty insisted. "Look at this storm. I doubt Team Magma would be alright with this. It's just too...too..."

"Out of control," Clemont finished for her, and she nodded her head. He looked at Ash thoughtfully. "Okay, but adding onto that, what if what Serena said was right? What if they can only use a limited amount of legendaries at once and all the data is stored in separate places? They might not have the ability to get the more powerful ones."

"That would explain why a fake Giratina isn't terrifying everyone," Leaf muttered, remembering the dragon-ghost Pokémon from years before.

"They have more resources now that they have Kanto," Clemont continued. "A lot more if you consider the other Teams helping them. What if they're aiming to make...what if that's what Arceus is worried about?"

"What would Arceus be worried—oh." Serena's eyes went wide, her mouth curving into an O shape. "Oh."

"A Mirage Arceus," Ash said bitterly.

Having been mostly listening to the exchange silently, May had enough of all this speculating. She slapped her hand onto her knee. "Alright then, we won't let that happen. Maybe all the orbs together will stop it, so where's the next one we need to find?"

"We?" Misty repeated.

"If you think I'm letting you leave here without me, you're wrong." May crossed her arms in front of her. "I know Hoenn better than you guys. I was there when you found out about your Aura, Ash. I've always been a part of this." She nodded at him. "You can't tell me it's a coincidence that we found you coming off of that boat."

He opened his mouth to argue, but found that he couldn't. "May, what we're doing is really dangerous. More than anything before."

"Technically, I've died before." Drew looked alarmed at that but she just shrugged. "I thought it was my fault Max was gone too. I thought what that fake Manaphy did was my Manaphy doing it and it was my fault. Team Rocket or any of the others can throw what they want at me, I'm not afraid." (Is this still Ash talking?)

They all fell into silence before Drew added, "If she goes, I go. That is, if you know where to go at all."

That had them all stumped, but Ash shrugged. "In Groudon's shrine, there was something written on the walls. Something about going to where the Steel Form slumbers."

"Steel Form? A Steelix?" Serena suggested.

"Registeel!" May sat up straight. "Where Registeel sleeps! I know that!" She twisted to look at Drew. "We were there not too long ago, right?"

Drew raised an eyebrow before he realized what she was talking about. "The Ancient Tomb and cave system on Route 120." He looked around at everyone else. "They say that you can find a Registeel more powerful than the others there but I don't think anyone ever has."

"The Alpha Registeel," Ash interrupted. Misty nudged him. "Sorry."

"Sure. The Alpha Registeel. Anyway, the Tomb isn't exactly easy to get to. You won't find it on a map."

"Great," Gary sighed. There was a sudden crash of lightning, and the lights flickered.

"So how do we find it?" Serena asked. She glanced at Clemont, who shrugged.

"We'll lead you there," May pointed at herself and Drew. "We're coming too, right?"

The lights flickered again. "How about we talk more after we get some sleep?" Misty rested her head on Ash's shoulder. "I know I feel like I could sleep for a year, and you need to heal your ribs and your hand."

Ash smiled at her warmly. "I can't heal burns. You know that."

"You can heal yourself too?" Drew asked warily.

"Cuts and things like that. My own bones and things like that heal really quickly on their own but I can't do it on purpose. It just happens."

"Mew. Can you fly too?"

"What?" Ash laughed. "Why would I be able to fly? That's ridiculous." He paused. "It'd be cool though."

"That's all we need." Misty groaned. "You'd get distracted and crash into everything. I'd have to keep a leash on you."

"You don't already?" Leaf asked. Gary snorted and Ash glared at him.

"Sleep," Serena spoke up. She realized that she was quickly becoming the peacekeeper of the group, the calm voice of reason. If it wasn't for Clemont, she would have been absolutely overwhelmed by their explosive personalities. "We all need it." She got up first, moving over to where her sleeping bag was. Everyone else slowly got up, following her lead without much argument.

As if Arceus himself agreed with Serena, the lights flickered again before shutting off all together.

...

"Why didn't you tell me?"

May shifted onto her side so she could look at Drew. "About what?"

"The legendary Pokémon?" He suggested. "Ash? The Mirage Pokémon? Manaphy? Take your pick."

"Ash didn't want anyone to know about his Aura, and that's his choice. Maybe the whole thing with legendary Pokémon was his as well but we all just...kind of agreed to keep it to ourselves. No one ever questioned us. Mirage Pokémon, Lance didn't want us talking about it. Manaphy..." May trailed off. She didn't know how to address that one. She could claim that she just wanted to protect the Pokémon, but she claimed that Drew was one of her best friends. There was really no excuse about why she didn't tell him something so important. Instead, she changed the topic. "Are you sure you want to come?"

"Of course I'm going with you. If I don't you'll probably get distracted and fall off a cliff or

something," he replied dryly. "If you want to go, that is."

"Yeah, I have to."

That reply startled Drew a bit. "You don't have to do anything."

"I feel like I do. Like I'm supposed to go with them. It's hard to explain." She tilted her head a bit. "You don't need to protect me though. I really can handle myself and it's not like I'll be alone."

He rolled his eyes. "I was more worried about all the things you'd break on the way."

"Haha funny," May shook her head and turned around to look at everyone else.

Though they were whispering, it really wouldn't have mattered. Everyone else was completely dead to the world. Gary was sprawled across the floor, having long abandoned his sleeping bag due to the heavy heat. Leaf was curled up in a corner, cuddling with an Espeon none of them had even noticed her release. Clemont and Serena were still in their sleeping bags, though May was slightly amused to see Serena's hand resting on his. Misty and Ash weren't far from them. Ash was laying on his back, Pikachu curled up by Ash's head while Misty was using his stomach as a pillow.

Their story was amazing, but seeing how tired they all were said a lot.

Drew watched them with curious eyes. "It's a bit strange, isn't it?"

"Hmm?" May looked at him oddly.

"Them." Drew nodded towards the sleeping couple. "I know Ash. I know Misty. But I've never seen them together. I've never seen..." Trailing off, Drew shrugged.

"You've never seen them as a couple." May smiled warmly. "I was the one who figured it out first, you know. They were so awkward and shy, yet still so sweet. It's almost the perfect story, right? Best friends who fell for each other and managed to work through the distance while still loving each other?" Her smile fell. "Nothing's ever that easy though, is it?"

"No, it's not," Drew agreed. "I doubt it is for them too."

"It must be worth it though." May twisted around to look at him again. "Wonder what that'd be like?"

He stared at her for a moment as she slowly started to nod off. "I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Opening her eyes again, May smiled and then closed them, snuggling into her sleeping bag as she muttered, "Yeah. You too."

Drew once again looked towards Ash and Misty. He smiled a bit and looked back at May. Realizing that she was asleep, he quietly muttered, "Maybe I already did."

...

Delia Ketchum would never admit it, but she was a huge advocate of sleeping in. Most people assumed that she was one of those ones that was early to bed and early to rise, but it really varied for her. When Ash was young and had to get up for school she would rise early to make a lunch and make sure he wasn't running late. When he was gone though, she enjoyed staying up late to read a novel or watch the latest murder mystery or medical drama, and in turn rose a little later in the day. It was part of the reason that Ash ended up going late to get his first Pokémon, because not

only had he slept in, but she had too.

Ever since they were moved to Blackthorn City, ever since everything started spiraling out of control, the woman found herself staying up late and waking up early. No one questioned her though, because she retreated to her own small room every night fairly quickly, but she spent her time worrying and writing. Even now, there were things that she couldn't tell others, that she needed to keep to herself, and instead of letting it build up in her, she wrote it down. It was something she had done from a very young age.

Though she was tired when she woke with the dawning sun, Delia never let it show. She went to work in the kitchens, since she was put in charge of them. With more and more supposedly trustful recruits coming to Blackthorn City every day, there were many hungry mouths to feed. Grace, Brock and a few others helped her, but she was always the first one up.

That was why she was so surprised to see a young woman with bouncy, bright blonde hair. Delia watched her for a moment as she searched through the room curiously. She cleared her throat, and the girl jumped, turning around to stare with wide eyes. "Can I help you?"

"Oh!" She smiled brightly. "You must be Delia! I'm Tulip! I just got here last night and I was assigned to help in the kitchens! I couldn't really sleep so I came here early."

The girl seemed sincere enough, but Delia chose not to let her guard down entirely. "Taking in your surroundings? It must be a change. Where are you from?"

"Goldenrod City." She bounced on the heels of her feet. "I have family in Saffron City though, so I wanted to come and help in any way that I could. I'm not much of a trainer, but I'm a pretty good cook."

"Can I see your assignment?"

"Sure!" Tulip dug through her pocket and produced the paper that had her name, a copy of her trainer ID and where she was assigned. It wasn't something Delia really approved of, since it was reminding her more and more of a military camp than anything else, but she knew why they were doing it. "Can't be too careful, right?" The blonde's rhetorical question was true enough.

Delia handed her back the paper. "No, we can't. Well, I guess you can help me get everything set up for the morning shift." The light glinting off of something caught her eye, and she focused on a large, round, silver gemstone that hung from a chain on the girl's neck. "You should tuck your necklace into your shirt or take it off, just so it doesn't get ruined. It's beautiful."

"Thank you." Tulip smiled and touched the pendant. She tucked it into her black shirt and shrugged her narrow shoulders. "It's a family heirloom. I got it from my grandmother recently and I'd hate to lose it."

"Is she one of the ones in Saffron City?"

"Yes." Tulip's smile fell. She looked up at Delia shyly. "I just...want to do anything I can to help. You know? I'm worried about my family."

"So am I."

"You have family in Kanto?"

"No. My son and his friends went somewhere else. I'm sure they're fine, but I'm still worried."

"Did they go back to Kanto?"

"Goodness no," Delia shook her head. "At least, I don't think so." She turned on the oven. "Now, the flour is under there, if you could grab it for me?"

Tulip frowned slightly before smiling again. "Sure!" She practically skipped towards the area indicated.

Delia watched her cautiously, but shrugged it off. This girl seemed nice enough. Maybe she was just being a little too paranoid.

...

Gary woke up with a stiff, sore neck. He groaned unhappily as he forced his heavy eyes open. It took him a moment to remember where he was, and an even longer period of time to realize that he had tossed aside his pillow and sleeping bag at some point in time.

He shifted slightly, looking around to see where they were. A small smile ticked up on his face when he saw that Leaf had commandeered both the sleeping bag and the pillow at some point during the night. He remembered back when they were younger, she always had a hard time getting to sleep, needing practically a mountain of pillows and blankets. He went back and forth on how he slept, while Ash just kind of fell anywhere and started snoring.

His eyes locked onto his other friend, unsurprised to see that Ash was still asleep. Sleep had been a rarity for all of them lately, but Gary got the distinct feeling that Ash slept even less than he let on. Misty shifted slightly, still using her boyfriend's stomach as a prop for her head.

The brunet pushed himself up and took stock of everyone else. Serena, Clemont, May and Drew were all still sleeping peacefully in their own sleeping bags, and Gary took a moment to relish the quiet. It was nice to see things peaceful, even if it was just for a moment.

"Esp." He jumped as Espeon popped up from behind Leaf's sleeping figure. She looked at Gary and then up at the ceiling.

"What's wrong? Is something—?" His question was cut off by the door slamming. The crash was loud enough to jerk Clemont, Serena and Drew out of their sleep.

"What was that?" Serena asked, rubbing her eyes and looking around with confusion, her blonde hair sticking in all directions.

No one had the chance to answer her question as Solidaridad came flying down the stairs. The pink-haired woman's clothes were a disheveled mess, her eyes wide and panicked. Drew pushed himself to his knees and asked, "Solidaridad, what's wrong?"

"Everyone needs to get up, now." Her words were so stern and strict, that they all knew there was no point in arguing with her. "Come upstairs when you're all awake. There's something you need to see." She turned around, tangled hair flying behind her as the normally composed woman ran back up the stairs.

The four exchanged uncomfortable glances before Drew turned around, shaking May's arm. Clemont shifted over to Ash and Misty, and Serena roused Leaf from her sleep.

"What's going on?" Ash asked, yawning loudly as he sat up. Misty just groaned a bit, her head falling from his stomach to his lap, refusing to get up.

"Dunno, Solidad just said to get upstairs," Drew answered, lips pursed slightly. "I've never seen her like that before. We should hurry."

Harley was sitting in the living room when they got up there. Rather, he was stretched out on the couch, not bothering to move in order to make room for the group. "Goodness, don't you all look ratty?"

"Stuff it before I do it for you," Misty grumbled, still obviously tired. Ash wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and she leaned on him, eyes closing as she dozed while standing up.

Harley was about to give her some scathing, sarcastic response, but Solidad came back into the room and held up her hand. "Not now. This is important." She turned on the television, the power had been restored while they were asleep at some point in time.

It was a news broadcast, though that didn't come as a surprise to anyone. What made every one of them tense up a bit though was the gleaming red pin in the shape of an R that the woman wore, the unmistakable symbol of Team Rocket. The next thing that came on the screen startled all of them.

It was a picture of Ash, taken no doubt from his trainer profile in Kalos. They all looked at the real Ash before looking back at the screen. What they heard next shocked them.

"Team Rocket put a fucking bounty on your head?!" Gary asked incredulously.

"Team Aqua and Team Magma put bounties out for the Hoenn Gym Leaders and Elites too," Solidad added. "And none of those are nearly as high as that." She looked over to Ash, pale aqua eyes studying him critically. "Whatever you did to get on their bad side, it must have been big."

"The Gym Leaders?" May asked, her voice rising.

"I called your parents this morning. I caught them just before they were taking off. They know you're safe, and they're hiding for now," Solidad assured her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "It was one of the first things I thought of."

"Good." May sighed with relief, but then her hand clenched tightly. "And Max is okay, right?" She looked at everyone else.

"Tracey sent us a message saying he and Brock were with them. They're okay," Misty assured her.

"They kidnapped him in Kalos. Ash, I mean," Clemont said, turning the topic back to the other Donphan in the room. "But they didn't seem all that interested in him. Not that much."

"Huh, that money would make a person live comfortably for quite some time, wouldn't it?" Harley asked, receiving dirty looks from everyone else.

"At least it says wanted alive," Leaf spoke up. "Not gonna shoot you on sight or anything." Misty shot Leaf such an angry look that the other girl took a couple steps away from her.

Drew looked at the teenager in question, who was just staring at the screen blankly. "Ash, why would they want you? How would they even know you're in Hoenn?" They all stopped talking to listen to him.

Much to everyone's surprise, Ash burst out laughing. Even Pikachu stared at him oddly. Ash shook his head. "I'm on a wanted poster! For the jerks that want to destroy the world! For a ton of money!" He snorted. "Maybe you guys can turn me in for the money. It'd be enough to run somewhere safe."

Harley and Solidad aside, all of them knew Ash well enough to catch the way his voice pitched (hitched?) at the end of his sentence. He didn't find the situation amusing at all, it was more like a small fit of disbelief and hysteria. Misty put her hand on his shoulder.

"We can't stay here," Clemont realized. "That's why you wanted us to get up so quickly, right?" The question was directed at Solidad. "Dozens of people saw us on the boat. At the pier. Some might have even seen us leave with May and Drew and it wouldn't take a genius to figure out where we are. Where Ash is."

"You really think normal people would turn him in to Team Rocket?" Serena asked, raising an eyebrow as she tugged her fingers through her hair.

"Everyone that was on that boat with us just lost everything," Leaf spoke up grimly. She shook her head. "Yeah, people are going to try to cash that check. Clemont's right. We can't stay here."

"Okay, but we need more supplies first," Gary said, brow furrowing thoughtfully. He looked at Solidad. "Are any of the stores open?"

"Yeah, but they're busy," the woman informed them. She looked at Ash. "That means you can't go. Not until you're ready to leave this house. I could take some of you to get some things though."

"We can get everyone's bags packed up and look through the supplies that everyone has already," Misty suggested to Ash. There was absolutely no question in her mind that she would be staying back with him. She had more than one motive for wanting to stay behind with him. They would help by packing things up, but she also wanted to get into his head a bit, to see exactly what he was thinking.

Ash might have been open and friendly to people, but he hated unloading his own problems onto them. It often took a little poking and prodding even from her.

Everyone else agreed, and they all moved to get ready for their no-doubt hectic day.

...

With long lists of everything they needed, from potions and food for Pokémon, to escape ropes and other gear they were low on, to medical supplies and food that would last them, Solidad and a reluctant Harley led most of the group to the busy Lilycove Department store. It was still raining outside, but not nearly as hard as the previous night. They wanted to take this window to leave as quickly as they could, hopefully getting farther inland before the storm could pick up again.

Misty and Ash were busy packing up everyone's sleeping bags and making sure that the supplies they did have were evenly divided, even amongst May and Drew.

Earlier, Ash had asked them once again if they were sure about coming, and May's fierce insistence was enough to answer for both of them. She was going and nothing would stop her, and if she was going, Drew was going.

Normally, that would have amused Ash a lot. Instead, he just nodded and went back to work, not acknowledging anyone as they left.

Misty watched Ash as he slowly turned his hands, the Normal and Ground Orbs glowing in them. He was so desperately trying to keep his face straight that she almost wanted to ignore the fact that his shoulders were so tense, his movements stiff and robotic. It was when he ignored Pikachu's attempts to ask him what was wrong that Misty knew she couldn't just leave him be.

She picked up the dejected Pokémon and nuzzled her cheek against his fur before pressing a kiss to his forehead. "Don't worry, I got this."

Pikachu's ears perked up a bit and he nodded. "Pi pi Pikachupi." He had complete faith in her ability to yank his trainer out of any sort of funk that he fell into, as rare as that was. As Misty approached Ash, Pikachu made himself busy by making sure that everyone had equal amounts of ketchup packets in their bags. It was a treat that Ash rarely let him have, but he was sure he could get it from some of the others.

Misty put a hand on Ash's shoulder as she knelt beside him. His shoulder tensed, and as she leaned forward to see his face, he looked away a little more. "What's wrong?"

He opened his mouth to reply, but closed it quickly. His lips quivered slightly, brown eyes looking towards the orbs. Misty waited patiently as he tried to start a sentence but would stop himself, unsure of how to say what was on his mind. In the dim basement, the orbs cast an eerie light around them.

His shoulders slumped as he gave up on whatever was running through his head. "What if someone gets hurt?"

Unsurprised by this question, she squeezed his shoulder comfortingly. "We've been over this. It's our choice to come and –."

Without warning, Ash suddenly shrugged her off, moving away from her a bit. "They're looking for me, Misty. Before we ran into trouble because we were at the wrong place at the wrong time but we were hiding so that Lance and our parents wouldn't find us and drag us home." He shook his head, and jammed the orbs back into his bag. "This is different. This isn't even just being stalked by Jessie and James or facing Team Rocket head on. There's Team Aqua and Magma. There are people who would just try to get me for the money." He closed his eyes. "If something happened to you—any of you, I don't...not when I'm the only one that has to be here. You were right when you said this was my fault."

Misty scowled fiercely. She twisted around so that she was sitting on his legs, straddling him. Ash jerked back a bit with surprise, but the girl put her hands on his cheeks so that he was looking at her and couldn't look away. She ran her fingers over barely visible freckles that some people didn't even realize he had, and shook her head. "You listen to me, Ash Ketchum." Her voice was strict and stern, because she wasn't going to leave any room for argument. "We're not stupid. We all saw what you saw upstairs and we all still intend on going with you. Even May and Drew. We know how dangerous this is going to be. We know the risks." She took a deep breath. "I can't promise bad things won't happen. You know I can't, but if it does, it's on all of us, not just you. If anyone wants to back out, that's fine. We're coming because we want to. Because we'd fight back in our own ways anyway." Misty dropped her hands to his shoulders, pleased when he didn't look away. "Don't even think about sneaking off to go alone. The world might need you, but you need us. And I'm definitely not going anywhere but with you."

At some point during her hopefully very motivational speech, Ash had uncrossed his arms and rested his hands on her hips. He silently studied her, a small smile slowly spreading across his face. "Why do you always know what to say?"

"I'm just that awesome." She winked at him. "It's why you love me."

Ash quickly closed the slight distance between them, pressing his lips against hers. Misty hummed a bit, warmth running up her spine as she closed her eyes and tilted her head slightly. She could feel his hands on her waist, fingers drawing small pictures on the exposed skin.

Her eyes opened when Ash pulled away slightly. They stared at one another, their heavy breathing the only sounds either could hear in the empty house. "Yeah," Ash said, breaking the silence. "I guess that is one of the reasons."

"Just one?"

"Just one."

It was strange. Ash had been her friend for seven years, her boyfriend for a little over three of those seven, and little moments like this always made her heart beat quicker. Sure, Ash wasn't exactly the type to be romantic or sappy, but Misty knew he loved her. She didn't need stereotypes to be happy. Small moments like this though, where he was unintentionally sweet, meant a lot to her. It was a hundred percent him being impulsive and honest, and she loved it.

"I'm sorry," Misty said suddenly. He eyed her oddly, but she shook her head to silence the question that she knew was coming. "Back on Sootopolis. I said some horrible things to you. And I'm sorry. I was just so upset about my sisters and so scared for you and everyone else that it just...I tried to keep a brave face on in front of everyone else and I guess it just built up. I took it out on you, and you're the last person I should have taken it out on." She looked down. "If the world's going to hell, the last people we should be nasty to are the people we love."

"I know everything just came out and I know you didn't mean it," Ash assured her. It might have been stupidly optimistic of him, but he just knew that Misty hadn't really meant everything that she said, that she was just frustrated. He was angry at the time, but after everything that happened, their fight completely flew out of his mind. "It's not like I was exactly nice either."

Misty kissed him briefly, a small peck that made him protest when she moved back so quickly. The sound made her smile. "I love you."

"Love you too." The distance between them disappeared again as they leaned into one another.

Pikachu looked up from the last backpack, having completely ignored the two trainers in the room up to that point. He rolled his dark eyes and sent a light jolt of electricity their way.

"Ow! What the heck?" Ash glared at his partner after he pulled away from Misty.

"Pika pika ka chu pika pikachu."

"We were not!" Ash's face turned red.

"Chuuuu." Pikachu once again rolled his eyes in clear disbelief.

Misty laughed, startling both of them. Still sitting on Ash's lap, she rested her cheek on the top of his head, one arm going around his shoulders and the other she held out to Pikachu, who understood and quickly jumped into them. She held the Pokémon close to her and nuzzled her face into Ash's dark hair. The young man smiled, resting his forehead on her shoulder as he hugged her and Pikachu tightly.

Love wouldn't solve their problems, not by any means, but it was still a small comfort in a steadily darkening world.

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Trust Exercises

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Sometimes it seemed like the rain was going to stop, but the eight teenagers quickly learned not to be too hopeful. The rain would lull for a while, then come back with a vengeance. Sneakers had been swapped out for rubber boots, sweaters for rain jackets.

Pikachu whined miserably. He was tucked inside of Ash's jacket as they moved through the murky forest. The ground was so slick and unstable from the near-constant rainfall, that even before they left Lilycove City there were reports of mudslides and sinkholes, like the earth was just giving out under their feet.

With Groudon gone, maybe it was.

They avoided the main roads as well as the main paths set out for trainers, choosing to stick to the smaller, less-travelled ones. The slick mud and slight flooding forced them off of the paths and into the forest, where they were left with maps, a compass, and a GPS that they were saving if they got really lost since the batteries were dying on it.

Clemont made most of his things solar powered, but it felt like they hadn't seen the sun in months even if it had only been a few days. None of it was working very well anymore. Not only that, but the atmosphere around them was rather gloomy. It was mostly just a side effect from the miserable weather, but it made them tired, glum, and a little short with one another.

Drew wasn't really sure what to make of this group. Somehow, though introductions told him that Leaf and Gary hadn't travelled with Ash before either, he felt as if he was the odd one out. They told him tales of time travel, alternate worlds, and beings that could shape or break their world without much effort. His mind ran over all the times that he had interacted with Ash, May, Brock and Max in the past while they were all traveling together. He never would have suspected it. Sure, he read about different incidents but they were never mentioned. Of course, what responsible government agency would put the names of kids in the papers?

The only sound outside of the rain was the soft hum of May's voice. Drew wasn't sure when she had started to hum and quietly sing, but it was a lot more pleasant than just listening to the squish of the mud under their feet. It was a surprise to Drew the first time that he heard May sing, because

she was good at it. Her voice was sweet and happy, and always brought everyone's spirits up a bit. Maybe that was why everyone seemed to walk closer together, so they could hear her as she sang quietly.

"Lavender's green, dilly, dilly, lavender's blue, if you love me, dilly, dilly, I will love you..."

He shook his head slightly. She forced him to go see a silly fairytale movie and had been humming and singing the songs ever since. It annoyed him at first, but the songs were starting to grow on him, though he'd never admit it.

"Let the Chatot sing, dilly, dilly, and the Mareep play. We shall be safe, dilly, dilly, out of harm's way..."

May's voice made everything seem a little bit better. The weather seemed a little less harsh. To Drew, that was absolutely amazing.

No one noticed Ash coming to a stop until Misty ran into him. They both stumbled a bit, Ash nearly dropping Pikachu in the process. Luckily the small Pokémon was still tucked safely in Ash's jacket. Pikachu wouldn't have been impressed at all if he had ended up in a mud puddle.

"What now?" Gary snapped. He didn't mean to snap, but he was agitated and down because of the near-constant rain.

Ash glared back, just as annoyed. He motioned behind him wildly. "Sorry, I didn't want to pitch face-first off the side of a cliff." There was a hill so steep that it would have been impossible for them to scale without proper climbing gear and then a thin flat surface that led to a steeply sloping hill. A worn path was on the thin ledge, created by years of Pokémon walking along the hazardous trail. Covered in puddles and mud, it looked less than safe.

"What now?" Clemont called out above the wind. He directed the question towards Ash, who shifted a bit while holding onto Pikachu.

"Well...we could keep going," he suggested. "Or go back."

"Go back and see if there's another way?" Gary clarified, receiving a nod from the other boy. "We should do that." He wasn't one to back away from a challenge, but this seemed a little too ridiculous for him. There was no way that going such a hazardous way would be a good idea.

"But we could get lost," May argued. "We know we're heading in the right direction, it's not far. And who knows how far we'll have to backtrack?" Her blue eyes were practically blazing as she clenched her hand into a fist. "I say we keep going forward." Out of everyone, Gary didn't expect her to be the one to oppose his idea so quickly.

"I'm with Gary," Serena spoke up. "It's way too dangerous."

"It is, but so is going back. If there was an easier way back there, we would have gone that way in the first place," Misty pointed out. "I vote we keep going." She looked up at Ash expectantly.

Ash shrugged his shoulders and looked down at Pikachu, who nodded encouragingly. He glanced at Gary quickly. "Sorry, I'm with them."

"Are you serious?" Gary groaned and looked around at Clemont. "What do you think?"

Clemont eyed the landscape before them and slowly shook his head. "We go back."

"Three versus three then." Misty's eyes turned towards Leaf. "What's your vote."

Leaf had been staring off into the distance, biting her lip in thought. She snapped out of her daze when Misty addressed her, looking at the redhead silently for a moment. "Let's keep going."

"Seriously?" Gary growled. "You're taking their side?"

"Yes." Such a simple reply actually stumped him a bit, and Gary wasn't quite sure how to respond do it.

"So it's four versus three now." May looked around at Drew. "Do we want to go forward? Or go back again?"

Drew stared at her in silent thought before his gaze shifted, locking onto each person in the group one by one. They were all equally wet. They were all equally miserable. Most importantly, they were all equally right about their points. It was because of that, that Drew just knew they would get stuck there arguing all day. While his instincts told him that they should actually take the safer route for once, common sense and not wanting to be stuck in the rain for longer than he needed to be prompted Drew's decision. "Let's keep going."

Gary, Serena and Clemont all groaned, exchanging unimpressed looks but not arguing. Everyone got to voice their opinion, and there was nothing they could do about it aside from wander off of on their own. None of them were willing to do that.

Ash used one arm to hold onto Pikachu, reaching back and grabbing Misty's hand. "Hold hands! If someone does slip we can try to yank them back up!"

Slowly and carefully, the group trudged forward. There was no running ahead of silly lollygagging. They moved steadily as a group, nearly reaching the other side.

Then Leaf's foot slipped out from under her. She swore her stomach leaped up to her throat as she slid off the path. Not once did she scream. Clemont and May tried to pull her back up, but her momentum was too much. Instead, she pulled them with her, and the weight of three people was just too much. In an undignified domino effect, they all fell down.

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The sun was high in the sky, the air stiflingly hot. Not that the sun was bothering Tracey, since he was inside, but he really thought that the Elders of Blackthorn City should invest in air conditioning. With more and more people flocking to the temporary G-Men headquarters, there were more mouths to feed, more people shoved into too-small rooms, and a lot more tension. More people also meant that there was more likely to be a traitor in their midst.

It was something Tracey tried not to think about, but was always on the edge of his mind. Even as his pencil scratched an image onto his sketchpad, he had the feeling that something wasn't right. Tracey quickly corrected his thought. Nothing was right anymore.

The sound of footsteps caught his attention, and he nodded at Brock, who took a seat across from him. The brunet looked down at the image he was sketching and frowned. Over the past few days, he had been so worried about his own family, trying to help find a way to start smuggling people who could be in danger out of Kanto, that he hadn't thought at all about Tracey. It never occurred to him to ask if he was okay or needed help.

"Neither of us were made for this mess." Brock had no idea where those words came from exactly, but they seemed to have caught Tracey's attention. "I'm trying to be a Pokémon doctor. I heal them.

I don't try to think up strategies and invasion plans. I don't think about war and fighting." He shook his head. "And you, you're an artist. One of the nicest people I know." Brock looked back at the picture. "I don't know how you're keeping it together."

Tracey looked back down and frowned at the outline of Daisy that he was shading in. She was smiling and happy, like she was most of the time. He drew her with her hands on her hips, standing tall and proud like she was the day she took over once again as the official Cerulean City Gym Leader. She worked so hard with Misty's help, and was proud to take over the family gym and give her younger sister the chance to pursue her own dreams in other ways.

Barely a week later, she was dead along with Lily, Violet, Violet's unborn baby and thousands of others. All because of Team Rocket and their Mirage Pokémon.

"I guess...I just keep hoping that maybe she's alive. That they all are. The last we heard, they did find some survivors and were still looking." He shrugged. "I know it's a long shot but...there's nothing else I can do for her. If they're alive, if they're dead, we won't know if we can't stop Team Rocket. We need to do that first."

"Or at least minimize the damage until Ash does...whatever it is he has to do," Brock added. Tracey told him everything that he knew, about Ash having a dream about a solution to all of this, but he didn't know much more beyond that. It really bothered Brock that his friends were out there on such a dangerous mission without him. If he had come a day sooner, he could have went with them to at least make sure that they'd be okay if they were hurt.

"Do you think he can really stop this?" Tracey asked, trying not to let the skepticism slip through. He so desperately wanted to believe that his friend was doing the right thing.

"With the legendary Pokémon involved, I think he's the only one that can," Brock admitted after a moment of thought. He honestly believed that. After everything that he had seen in the past, everything that Ash described to him later on, if anyone could save the world, it was definitely Ash Ketchum (with the help of whoever was with him). This whole situation was so complicated though. It wasn't like they just ran through the motions in 24 hours of insanity. There was time to think, time for dark, nagging thoughts and doubts to take hold.

For a moment, Brock wanted to voice his concerns, but changed his mind. Tracey was holding on to hope to keep him going, to not give in to worry and fear, and he didn't want to take any of that away.

A crash echoed from the other side of the room. Both young men looked around and saw a young woman who was scrambling to pick up the plates that she had dropped.

"Are you okay?" Brock called out, getting up to valiantly help the young woman. Even from far away, he knew that she was attractive with her twisted blonde pigtails and curvy figure.

"Just fine, a bit clumsy." She looked up, her violet eyes locking onto Brock's. She giggled as Brock froze and she said, "I could use a hand though."

"Oh, sure," Brock snapped out of his daze and shook his head. He knelt down to help her pick up the plates that she had dropped. "It's lucky none of them broke, you could have hurt yourself..." He trailed off, his voice rising as if he was asking a question.

"Tulip." She smiled again as she stood up and held out her arms. Brock handed her back the plates.

"Tulip, huh?" He smiled brightly. "You must be new here. I would have recognized someone with

your beauty." Brock heard Tracey groan in annoyance.

"Flatterer," Tulip said, carefully smacking his arm gently. "I am new. Assigned to work in the kitchens with Mrs. Ketchum and Mrs. Liscio. I should be getting back there. It's nice to meet you." She quickly turned and walked out of the room.

"She didn't even ask you for your name," Tracey pointed out after a moment. He still couldn't believe that Brock was so quick to jump into his flirtations after having such a serious conversation.

"I noticed." His serious tone startled the other young man. Brock slowly shook his head as he stared at the door. "I know her."

"You know most girls."

"Yeah, but that's the thing, I know I know her. I've seen her somewhere before, but I can't remember where."

Brock's confession gave Tracey pause. If there was one thing that was guaranteed in the world, it was that Brock would always remember the name and face of a woman he found attractive, even if he hadn't seen them in years. The fact that Brock knew that woman, yet didn't know her at the same time, was a bit startling. It was also very unsettling, given what was happening around them.

"We should keep an eye on her," Tracey decided. "Just in case. It could be nothing." Brock nodded his head in agreement. Neither one of them wanted to bring up the fact that while it could be nothing, the odds of it being something were much higher.

...

May groaned, her eyes fluttering as she slowly came to. It took her a moment to remember what happened, but when she did, the young teenager quickly sat up and looked around. Much to her confusion, she was in a cave with big leaves on top of her to keep her warm. Around her, all of her friends were seemingly asleep under their leafy blankets. The brunette had absolutely no idea what was going on, but she was positive that they didn't land inside a cave after falling.

Movement to her right startled her. May looked over as a small Plusle stretched out beside her. The Pokémon must have sensed her staring, because he looked around quickly, eyes lighting up happily. "Plus! Plusle!" She looked around as more little Pokémon started moving around them.

"Oh, did you guys bring us in here?" They nodded in unison, earning a smile from her. "Thank you so much."

"Pikapi!" May swore that she was going to get whiplash with how many times that she twisted her head around to take in everything that was going on. Pikachu was standing beside Ash, who seemed to be anything but peaceful. His eyes were squeezed shut and he kept shifting around, small, pained noises escaping his throat. A little Minun was standing beside them, ears and shoulders slumped.

"Ash?" May whispered as she scooted over towards him. She placed a hand on his shoulder and gently shook it. Slowly, he blinked his unfocused eyes open, staring up at May with confusion. She quickly backed away as he sat up, staring around the cave. The younger girl watched him as he looked from each person to the next.

Pikachu tilted his head slightly. "Pikapi. Pi pikachu pi pika." He patted his trainer's arm.

"Yeah, I...sorry." Ash smiled at Pikachu, running a hand through his hair as he looked back at May. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I think these Pokémon saved us." She motioned to them all. "Though they seem awfully small to have dragged us all here."

Ash looked down at the little Minun beside him, reaching out and stroking the Pokémon's head. "They're young. Really young. I saw their nightmares and there was a mudslide and their parents saved them all." Ash frowned, hand falling to his side. One of his stranger abilities was how he could see a Pokémon's dreams if they reached out to him, or they were particularly distressing and he was making contact with them. It didn't work with people, and only ever with distressing or sad scenarios. On one hand, it was a good way to get information, but on the other, he really despised the ability in general.

"They're all..." May didn't want to use the word orphans, but it was the only thing that actually came to mind.

"Could be, but their parents may have survived." Ash jumped at a particularly loud crash of thunder. His foot landed on Pikachu's tail, surprising the Pokémon, who unleashed a powerful shock that hit everyone around them. While the baby Pokémon were either spared or not affected by the attack, everyone else was quick to wake up.

"What the hell?" Gary practically exploded as he shook his head.

"Sorry!" Ash cried out, grabbing Pikachu, who was rubbing the back of his head with a weak smile on his face.

"Well, that's one way to wake everyone up," May said with a laugh. Everyone seemed to be alright and that was what mattered to her.

Serena groaned and pressed her hand against her forehead to try and ward off the headache. A warm pressure on her shoulder prompted her to look up, her blue eyes meeting Clemont's paler ones. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah." She smiled at him. "Just a headache. You seem okay though."

"Gym Leader. I'm used to electricity," he reminded her. He reached up and touched her hair, but upon realizing what he did, Clemont's face went red and he cleaned his throat. "Sorry, your hair's stuck up."

"Oh." Serena laughed, running her hands through her hair to flatten it. Once she was sure it wasn't a disaster, she dropped her hands, rubbing one of her arms. "Thanks."

"No problem." Clemont looked away quickly, but found himself looking at Leaf. The other girl was grinning broadly and winked at him. He looked away quickly.

"How'd we end up here?" Leaf asked, pushing herself up off of the floor to look around the cavern.

"They helped us," May answered, motioning to the little Pokémon that were scattered around.

Drew eyed her from where he was sitting, trying to be subtle about it. Misty nudged him and said, "If you're worried, just go ask if she's alright."

"She's fine," he insisted, putting on a voice of indifference. "I mean, she's...durable. You know she falls a lot anyway. A complete klutz."

"Alright then." Misty snorted with amusement. "You keep acting that way." Drew was about to reply when Gary's angry voice cut him off.

"Does anyone know where we are?" There was a pause and he huffed angrily. "I told you we shouldn't have gone on that ledge." The brunet was not impressed at all with their current situation. Not only should they have listened to him, but he could feel the bruises from the fall and the pain from the electricity. He was tired of the rain. He was tired of being tired. "But no, we went anyway."

"We all voted," Ash replied with a shrug. He set Pikachu on the floor and stood up, stretching out his sore limbs. "No one's hurt badly."

"And now we probably have an even longer way to go. Aren't you the one who said we might not have much time?"

"We're going as fast as we can!" Ash finally growled back, taking a step towards him. "What do you want us to do? Teleport to places? Both calls were shitty and we voted on the least shitty one. We fell. We'll get back on track. You need to calm down."

"You need to look at the situation for what it is, not what you want it to—!"

"I am!" Ash's voice rose an octave. "You think I'm not?!"

"Stop!" Misty jumped up, forcing her way between the two boys and pushing Gary away from Ash. "Stop it. Ash is right. We all chose. Yeah, it sucks and maybe we should have gone back but if there was an easier way we would have went that way in the first place."

"Am I even supposed to take your opinion seriously?" Gary deadpanned. "Of course you're going to agree with him."

"Excuse me?" She narrowed her eyes.

"I voted to go back too," Clemont pointed out. "There's no point getting angry over it." He was completely ignored by both Gary and Misty though.

"You heard me. Hard to trust your opinion when you're siding with someone you're sleeping with."

"Don't talk to her like that!" Ash snapped, his temper finally boiling to the surface. He tried to step around Misty to face Gary without her in between them, but she grabbed his arm and forced him to stay behind her. While she was thankful that he was willing to stand up for her honour, she didn't need him to fight this battle for her.

Gary snorted, as if their actions proved his point, and that was when she snapped. "And what have you done exactly to make your opinion worth so damn much?" Misty practically exploded, shoving him backwards. "Nothing but growl and put everyone else down."

"Okay guys, stop," Leaf groaned. "I mean, you both have good points but—."

"How can you agree with him?" Misty growled.

"This is ridiculous!" Serena snapped, stomping her foot on the ground. "Everyone needs to stop being so childish!"

May took a few steps away as all six of them started growling at one another, turning from one person to the next in what seemed like ten arguments at once. She gaped at them and looked over

at Drew as he approached. "You're not going to start yelling at me, are you?"

"Looks like fun to me," Drew replied sarcastically, nodding at the group. If May was going to respond to that, she never got a chance. The little Pokémon ran away from the arguing group, clearly frightened by all the noise.

"Oh, it's okay," May cooed to the Pokémon. "They're not mad at you. No! Don't go up there, you'll get stuck!" Somehow a little Zigzagoon managed to scale the rock wall, balancing precariously on a ledge. May was quick to go after it, scaling the wall. Drew stayed on the ground beneath her, watching warily.

"Come here baby Zig," May muttered as she climbed up. She got close to the little Pokémon, who used her head as a spring board to jump off of. "Ow. Hey!" She flailed a bit, her hand landing on something soft that definitely wasn't rock. She looked up, eyes meeting an annoyed Spinarak that hissed at her. May screamed, not expecting that at all, and jumped away from the wall.

Drew grunted as she fell into his arms, stumbling back a little bit but just managing to keep his footing.

"Thanks," May said with a sheepish laugh, one of her arms around his shoulder to steady herself.

"Yeah, no problem." Drew put her down, immediately reaching up and running a hand through his hair. It was only then that they both realized that the arguing had stopped.

May's cheeks turned bright red when she realized that everyone was looking at them. "What?"

"Pi pikachu pi pika." The Pokémon said with a nod.

"He said that's one hell of a trust exercise," Ash translated. "I agree."

May hadn't even thought about it that way, but they were certainly right. She'd been so quick to jump because she trusted Drew would catch her and not let her hit the ground and break a bone. Out of the corner of her eye, May looked at him. Then an idea hit her. A smile spread across her face and she clapped her hands together. "That's what we need! Trust exercises!"

"What?" Leaf asked the question they were all thinking.

"Think about it. That's the big issue here, right? So let's do just a few things to show that yeah, we screwed up, but we can still trust each other." Most of them looked skeptical, so May turned to Drew, eyes pleading for support.

He sighed and said, "She's right. Everyone has some issues but there's gotta be some things we can do for right now. Easy things. Catching one another and things like that. It's also good for a small break to take our minds off of everything else."

"Are you kidding me?" Gary asked, raising an eyebrow.

May's smile turned into an absolutely fierce expression. "Did I stutter?"

There was a stunned silence as everyone just stared at her. "Alright, I'm in," Ash agreed after a moment. Misty nodded her head.

"Kay! You guys can start then!" May said happily, motioning for them to come forward. "Just catch each other. Uh...if you can hold each other up."

"I think I can get her," Ash joked, grunted as Misty elbowed his stomach. "Calm down woman, I was joking."

"So this is just the thing where we fall and catch each other?" Misty clarified.

"Easiest way to start." May nodded her head at the older girl.

Ash wasn't even standing behind her and Misty just shrugged and let herself fall. Her boyfriend yelped with surprise and shot forward, managing to grab her before she hit the ground. "I wasn't ready yet."

"Point still stands, I trusted that you would catch me and you did." Ash looked like he was about to argue but stopped since there was nothing to argue about. "Okay, now I'm going to catch you."

"You'll be able to hold him up?" Clemont asked. He was more curious than skeptical, since he knew that Ash wasn't exactly the lightest person around, having had to stop him from falling off of cliffs in the past.

"Are you kidding?" Ash was the one who answered that, waving his arms in the air. "She can lift me up. Maybe you can't see it but she's strong." Misty seemed very pleased with his assessment and caught him when he fell back. He smiled at her brightly.

"See, it's easy!" May looked around at Gary, putting a hand on her hip. "Alright, cranky, do you two wanna give it a shot?" She nodded at Leaf.

Leaf actually took a step away from him, crossing her arms in front of her. "I'd rather not."

"Ow, I'm hurt Leaf," Gary quipped sarcastically. Ash tilted his head slightly, because while it seemed like Gary didn't care, he could feel the little bit of hurt. "I wouldn't let you fall." If anything, she held herself tighter. "Whatever, I wouldn't trust you to catch me anyway."

"How about you two?" Drew quickly interrupted, nodding at Clemont and Serena.

Clemont is a bit surprised that Serena's willing to do it and catches her. She catches him but can't hold his weight and they both fall, him ending up in her lap. Still, he laughs and assures her it's alright, she DID catch him.

"There? Is everyone calm?" May asked, putting her hands on her hips. Even Gary and Leaf nodded their heads and she felt quite proud of herself. Really she was just trying to get everyone to stop arguing with one another for a moment. There was little doubt in her mind that everyone needed to talk at some point in time, but in a cave with a bunch of baby Pokémon wasn't the place to do it.

"Pi pika," Pikachu giggled and pointed at the baby Pokémon, who were doing the same little trust exercise. They were all smiling and having fun, and it was enough to bring smiles to all of the trainers' faces.

"Now if only finding a way to the Ancient Tomb without going into the rain was that easy," Leaf said, motioning towards the opening of the cavern. The rain was coming down so hard that it looked more like a sheet of water rather than individual droplets.

"What do you expect, for these guys to know a secret way to Registeel?" Drew asked, his voice dry. Gary snorted with amusement, and Leaf was so surprised by him talking back to her that she just stared at him.

"Pi." Pikachu tilted his head curiously, watching as the group of young Pokémon huddled in a

circle, whispering and motioning wildly with their hands. Every once and a while they would cast a glance at the trainers before turning back to the conversation. Finally, the Plusle walked forward.

"Plus plus plusle le."

Pikachu's ears twitched and he looked at Ash. "Pika cha pika ka Pikapi."

Ash blinked. "They want us to follow them."

"Follow them where?" Clemont asked, looking around the empty cavern.

The Pokémon answered this question by running over to a wall, and working together, they pushed aside a fairly large boulder, revealing a long, dark tunnel.

"Are you shitting me right now?" Gary blurted out. Leaf and Serena both shot him dirty looks.

"What? We just happened to fall down a massive hill of doom and happened to be rescued by baby Pokémon that happened to take us to the cave where there just happened to be a secret tunnel? Am I the only one that feels like we're being herded?"

That gave them all pause. He was right, there was absolutely no way that this was a coincidence. Ash took a step forward, lips pressed together, brow furrowed. "Maybe that's the point."

"The point?" May asked.

Ash motioned towards the outside of the cave. "Look at what's happening outside. Arceus...Arceus wouldn't care about helping if this was just a human thing. You know, with the leagues and all?"

"He wouldn't help if it was just a political crisis," Clemont clarified.

"Yeah." Ash nodded his head.

"You think this is what he meant when bad things were coming. What happened to Kyogre and Groudon." Misty wasn't asking if that was what Ash thought, she knew it was where he was going.

"Yeah. Whatever we're doing, this is what we're really trying to stop, and maybe that's how we stop Team Rocket too." Ash clenched his hand into a fist. "And if these Pokémon wanna herd us towards where we need to go, I say we let 'em. They have just as much to lose as we do."

Misty's smile shone with admiration as she took his hand and squeezed it tightly. "You know I'm with you."

"We all are, or we wouldn't be here at all," Leaf pointed out. She grabbed her bag off of the ground. "No point waiting, we might as well see what's at the end of the dark tunnel of doom."

Everyone moved to grab their own bags. While everyone was busy grabbing their bags, May tapped Drew's shoulder. He looked up at her curiously.

"Thank you," the brunette said with a smile. "For backing me up."

"You know you should have done those trust exercises with everyone," he deadpanned.

May's smile turned into a pout. "You know I was just trying to distract everyone. Just falling into each other isn't going to help. I know that. I think everyone just needs to calm down some."

"Probably," Drew conceded with a shrug. He eyed her curiously. "If you would have hit the ground when you jumped, you probably would have busted your ankle. Just from the way you were falling."

May thought about that for a moment and then shot him a teasing grin. "You might have been a little jerk when we were kids, still are sometimes, but I know you, Drew, and I knew you'd catch me. Ash was right, I do trust you." Her smile softened. "And I hope you know I'd catch you if you fell too." With that, May turned around to grab her own things.

Drew watched her for a moment, a small smile spreading across his face. He moved to get his bag when he met Serena's eyes. The girl was staring at him oddly, like she was amused and incredulous. "What?"

"Nothing," the blonde girl answered quickly. Drew eyed her for a moment before deciding just to shrug it off. Whatever was on her mind, it was nothing to worry about. No, there were more important things to focus on, like the dark tunnel that they were starting to walk into.

"What was that about?" Clemont whispered to Serena as they walked side by side.

"It's really nothing big. It's just..." She nodded to Drew and May. "He stares at her the same way Ash stares at Misty."

Leaf and Gary were close enough to hear them, and along with Clemont, they watched Ash talk to Misty before turning their attention to May and Drew. Gary snorted and shook his head. "Well I'll be damned. He does."

"It's good though," Leaf added with a small smile on her face. "The world could use more of that, especially now."

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A sharp crack echoed through the bright, empty room with blood-spattered walls. Giovanni watched the proceedings before him with interest, not even looking at the door as a light knock sounded from it. "Enter."

The steel door cracked open a bit, and a woman with long, magenta hair walked in. "Sorry to interrupt, Boss, but I was asked to run you a message."

"And?"

Her blue eyes locked onto the scene before her, and she flinched a bit. In the reflection of the glass that separated the sterile room from the dirty, bloody one, Giovanni saw her reaction and looked around. "Such things repulse you, Jessie?"

"No sir," Jessie answered quickly, straightening her back. "Not him. Just the messy room." She cleared her throat. "Agent 009 is on the phone for you."

"Good. You may go."

Jessie was quick to leave, but when she got into the hall, she found herself hesitating to close the door all the way. Instead, she leaned against it and listened.

"I have found some information on the Ketchum boy." Domino wasted no time with pleasantries when Giovanni turned on the video call from his cellphone. "Apparently, he and a group of his friends left the safety of Lance's little hideaway because they have a way to stop us." She paused for a moment. "His mother and friends that remain here seem pretty confident in whatever he's doing. Not that we have to worry about a group of kids."

"You would think, but this boy has caused problems that we weren't aware of before," Giovanni

replied. "Do you have the names of those he's traveling with?"

"Yes. His girlfriend, Misty Waterflower. Two friends he brought from Kalos: Clemont Liscio and Serena Paschall." She paused again, almost dramatically. "As well as Gary Oak and Leaf Green." Those names caught Giovanni's attention. "I read the files we have, sir. These two—."

"I know who they are," Giovanni interrupted. "Keep your cover for now, find out whatever you can." He ended the call before she could respond, his dark eyes turning to the room as another crack of a whip was heard. "Gary Oak and Leaf Green. I should have guessed." That was when an idea came to him. It seemed so preposterous, but at the same time, it filled in a lot of blanks.

Reaching out, Giovanni pressed a button to communicate with the man in the room. "That's enough for today, we want him to live. Before you put him away, take a sample of his blood." He waited patiently while the people in the other room did as he requested, and moments later, a man in a lab coat stood before him. "All Pokémon trainers submit a sample when they get their licenses, yes?"

"Yes sir. For identification in case a body is beyond recognition, or to find an identity of a criminal suspect," the doctor replied briskly. "We have access to the whole thing."

"Good. I want you to take the sample and run a test on it. Put it through the entire system so we don't miss anything. We're looking for a paternal match."

The doctor hesitated, his eyes flickering to the room, where a beaten and bloody man was being dragged away. "You wish to find Red's father, sir?"

"No, the other way around. I wish to find a child that he may have had."

"Oh! Of course sir! That's a brilliant idea! I will get it done straight away!" He turned to leave quickly.

"Doctor," Giovanni spoke up again, causing the man to pause mid-step. "While you're at it, I want you to compare Red's DNA sample directly to Ash Ketchum's."

"Yes sir." He left without another word.

Giovanni looked at the blood in the other room again, a smirk spreading across his face. "You may not tell me what I need to know for your own sake, but I wonder, would you do it for another?"

Not a single person, not even the doctor walking in and out of the room, had noticed Jessie pressed against the corner just outside the door. She heard Giovanni coming towards the door and was quick to move, hurrying back down the maze of steel hallways until she reached a very tiny, but comfortable living area. James and Meowth were already inside.

"What's wrong, Jess?" James asked, frowning when he saw how pale and shaken she was.

"I think something really bad is about to happen to the Twerps." Her voice wavered with genuine worry and fright. The three exchanged uncomfortable looks, because even if something bad was about to happen, there was nothing they could do to stop it.

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"Well that's not creepy at all," Misty said sarcastically, staring at the tunnel before them. The room was lit with the eerie, pale blue light of Ash's Aura Sphere, but that wasn't what she was referring to. No, she could deal with long dark tunnels and glowing lights that made people look all ghostly. What she didn't like was when the rough, natural tunnel that they were walking through suddenly

became smooth and straight, clearly chiseled out with carvings along the walls.

"What if it's cursed?" Serena whispered from behind her. "What if everything's fine at first but when we go in, booby-traps start springing and we all get separated by walls flipping and floors dropping out from under us and then a vengeful spirit is unleashed and it comes to pick us off one by one?"

"Serena!" Clemont groaned, looking around the room uncomfortably.

"Sorry," she muttered, clapping her hands over her mouth, just as frightened as he seemed to be. She shifted a bit behind Misty, who just seemed amused.

May looked at her, completely fascinated before looking at the tunnel. "Do you really think there's booby-traps in there? That would be cool! Like we're in our own adventure movie!"

"What kind of loser would watch a movie about us?" Drew deadpanned from behind Clemont. May huffed and glared at him, walking forward into the carved portion of the tunnel without any hesitation.

Ash wouldn't admit it, but the scenarios that Serena always came up with did freak him out a little bit, and he was glad that May took the first steps into the tunnel. He was quick to follow her.

Gary was the one that lagged behind a bit this time, staring at the walls with interest. He had studied ancient languages before, but for the life of him, he didn't recognize this. Not entirely. There were pictures of Pokémon, some he recognized, some he didn't that had probably been extinct for a long time. That alone clearly dated these tunnels, and it was a bit mind boggling. Some of the runes seemed similar to some he had seen in other places, but still different.

"Huh, this writing must be really ancient." He reached up, trailing his hand on the wall. "I see a couple things that might be numbers, but I'm not entirely sure."

"Numbers?" Leaf repeated.

"Yeah." He paused, and she stopped beside him. "See this one here? It looks really similar to four in another language I've seen before. I'm willing to bet that's what it means. Four what? I don't know."

"Rapidash?" She asked, pointing to a faint carving above it.

"Maybe. Or something that's extinct now. Seriously, this could just be a giant farm inventory or something." Gary's attention turned to another one. "Huh, I wonder what this one means?" He touched it, a bit surprised when the rock sank into the wall. "I should probably stop touching this stuff so I don't break it all or ruin it."

"There's an idea, come on, we're going to get separated from the others." Leaf tugged his arm, but the second Gary took pressure off the stone, it popped back into place and a loud grinding sound was heard. "What did you do?"

Everyone stopped walking, looking at their surroundings with confusion. Pikachu's ears flattened against his head and he whined, tucking himself as close to Ash as he could.

"Maybe it was just some rocks shifting somewhere else?" May suggested.

"Really, shifting rocks, that's the best you—" Before Drew could finish his sentence, the ground opened up below him and Clemont, and both of them fell.

Ash jerked forward to help them, but he barely made it a step before the floor he and May were standing on moved, the wall spinning with it and slamming shut behind them. Without Ash and his Aura Sphere, everything was plunged into darkness. Gary heard Serena and Misty both shriek in surprise, though all he could really focus on was the ground beneath his feet. It vanished, and he plummeted down into the unknown, taking Leaf with him.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

In Confusion And Chaos

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



When Drew hit the ground, he expected to hear the loud cracking of bones or something equally as morbid. Instead, there was nothing but his surprised 'oof' as he hit a rough, inflatable surface. He bounced up into the air and back down before coming to a stop, touching the canvas material with confusion. "What the—?"

"Oh thank Mew, I was hoping you'd land on it too," Clemont's voice rang from the darkness.

Drew was more than a little confused, unable to see anything to orient himself. Clemont turned on a flashlight and the green-eyed boy winced. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, but when they did, he found himself staring at a massive airbag. It started to deflate under him, so he quickly scrambled off of it, watching as it automatically rolled up into a small ball that Clemont picked up and shoved into his backpack. "What the hell was that?"

"I made it myself since my sister tends to forget that climbing on high things means that she can fall," Clemont admitted.

"Huh. That's actually pretty impressive." Drew was from LaRousse City, touted as one of the most advanced cities in Hoenn and many other regions. Yet they didn't have anything quite like that yet.

"I wonder where we ended up?" Clemont asked as he shined his flashlight around the cavern. A long tunnel stretched out before them, nothing but three stone walls on every other side.

"Well, only one way to go," Drew noted as he started walking forward.

"Don't you think we should wait in case someone else falls down?" Clemont shifted the light to the ceiling above them, where they could see an outline from the tunnel that they fell down.

"They probably would have if they were going to," he decided after a moment of thought. He kept his face calm, but Drew had to silently admit that he was a bit worried about what became of everyone else. He thought back, remembering how Gary accidentally sprang some sort of trap. It could have been just one, or everyone else might have been thrown in opposite directions. He had a feeling that no one else was coming down after them though.

Sudden amusement rushed through him and Drew laughed, shaking his head. "Looks like your girlfriend was partially right. Let's hope she was wrong about some sort of monster hunting us down." He dug through his own bag to pull out his flashlight and started walking.

"G—girlfriend?" Clemont stuttered, pausing before catching up.

"Serena? You two have been practically joined at the hip since we started traveling." He imagined that it probably went on before that.

"No," the blond assured him. "No, definitely not my girlfriend. She likes Ash."

"Of course she does." Drew snorted. "Lot of good that's going to do. He's hung up on Misty and that's hard to believe. He's not the brightest bulb when it comes to others, and people still flock to him."

Clemont felt his embarrassment fade away, being replaced with indignation. "How can you say something like that? Ash cares about others."

Drew didn't want to argue about Ash Ketchum of all things. In his mind, he saw Ash as a good motivator, a good cheerleader, but one on one, sometimes he just didn't get other people. Just from the short time they were traveling together so far, he could see that Clemont was good friends with the boy in question, so there was no point arguing over something so trivial.

They just needed to focus on getting out of these tunnels before they got lost in them.

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Serena's chest heaved as she slowly opened her eyes. While she never lost consciousness when the ground shifted beneath her, tossing her down a hallway that hadn't existed before, it was still such a gut wrenching ride that she had to squeeze her eyes shut and just hope that it would come to an end. A moment ago, she had collided with a wall, hearing another gasp of pain beside her, and then everything had gone silent. She could hear her own breathing, she could hear someone else, but she wasn't sure who it was.

"Serena?" Misty's voice came from the darkness.

Relief washed through the blonde. Her imagination was running wild again, and she was imagining some kind of monster beside her, so it was more than a little relieving to know that it was her friend. "I'm okay. Are you?"

"Nothing that a couple bandages won't fix," the redhead responded. Serena could hear her rustling around for something and winced when Misty turned on a flashlight. Both of them had to wait a moment for their eyes to adjust to their suddenly being able to see again. Then Misty gasped.

"What?" Serena asked, alarmed. "What's wrong?"

"You're bleeding." Misty shifted forward, eyes locked on the thin line of blood running down the side of Serena's face. The blonde reached up and brushed her finger against her head, and that was when the sharp pain hit her. She grimaced, closing her eyes as if that would stop the pain.

"I'm going to take off your hat to make sure it's not bad, okay?" Misty asked as she reached up, tugging the white and pink hat off of her head. Serena opened her eyes as Misty pushed her hair aside and studied her scalp. The redhead had such a look of concentration on her face that it was almost funny. "Okay, it looks like just a scrape that probably hurts like a bitch but it's not a bigger injury. Just to be sure..." Without warning, she shined the light in Serena's eyes.

"Ow, what the heck?"

"Checking to see if your eyes dilated. They did so I don't think you have a concussion." She held the flashlight in her mouth as she dug through her bag, pulling out a cloth. Misty's hand went to her belt and she tapped the button on one of her Pokéballs. There was a flash of white light, and her Marill appeared. "Can you soak this for me please?"

"Marill mar!" The Pokémon cooed happily, gently spraying water onto the cloth.

Misty wrung it out and handed it to Serena. "Keep this pressed against your head for a little while. It'll hopefully stop the bleeding in a bit. Head wounds always seem to bleed worse than they really are."

"You're good at this, you know?" Serena noted as she accepted the cloth and pressed it to her head, shoving her hat in her bag with her free hand.

"At what?" Misty asked as she picked up Marill and hugged the Pokémon to her.

"Being...I dunno...like a mother I guess. Nurturing. You must have had an awesome mother growing up or it all comes naturally."

"Oh." Misty laughed, her cheeks turning pink. "No. Ash was always just accident prone so I got used to patching up small things."

"But it's not just that. It's not just Ash. It's everything and everyone. Don't just shrug it off. Your mother must have taught you a lot."

She laughed a bit and shook her head, nuzzling her face into Marill's thin fur. "No, I don't really remember my mother. She died when I was really young. Too young to remember her. My grandmother was a good person though. She wanted us all to be brave and kind, but to stand up for ourselves and follow our dreams. My sisters certainly went after what they wanted, though I wouldn't say they were brave and kind. Not always. They grew up though. We all did." Her smile faltered.

Serena reached forward and put her hand on Misty's shoulder. "I'm sorry, I didn't know about your mother. But your sisters could be alive."

"I know. It's just...easier to accept the worst case scenario. Then you're already prepared for it and the only other outcome is something better."

"That's...sad." Serena stood up, pulling her bag over her shoulder, the other hand holding the cloth to her head. "But if it helps, then it helps. I'll keep hoping enough for both of us. We should go find everyone else." Despite her wild imagination, it never occurred to Serena that they should be overly worried about their friends. Maybe it was just because bad things were becoming commonplace with them, but she just wasn't that afraid for everyone else.

Misty looked down at Marill, who smiled and nodded, hopping out of her arms to walk alongside them. She nodded and got up, looking around. "Which way do you want to go?"

They were in the middle of a tunnel that stretched in opposite directions. Serena looked left and right and shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"Marill!" The blue Pokémon cried out. Both girls looked down, watching the water-type as she started to walk to the left. Marill turned to look at them and pointed. "Rill!"

"Guess we're going that way," Serena noted, amusement creeping into her voice.

"Guess we are."

...

The tiny little Aura Sphere hovered in the air as Ash, May and Pikachu walked quietly down the long tunnel that they were trapped in. They had attempted to get back through the trap door, but by using his Aura, Ash knew that no one else was on the other side anymore.

They had a choice, use Garchomp to dig through it, or follow Ash's earlier advice and let themselves be herded in whatever direction that they were being led in. It was true, everything was triggered by Gary hitting an ancient button, but there was no need for Aura to get the feeling that they were supposed to go in a certain direction.

May hugged Pikachu to her chest. Though she was glad that they had a light, it was still really eerie in there, the glow giving both her and Ash an almost ghost-like appearance.

Normally ghost stories didn't frighten May, but for some reason, the one that Serena mentioned earlier freaked her out the more she thought about it. "I guess Serena was right." They did get split up. "Let's hope that we don't get attacked by some sort of ancient monster."

"Something's going to come after us now just out of spite." Ash was amused, but also a little bit fed up. There must have been an easier way to get from one orb to the next than everything they had been doing. Maybe Clemont was just a little hesitant to suggest any ideas he came up with. No, even if that was the case, he would have told him.

Ash sighed, his shoulders slumping slightly. May tilted her head slightly. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just tired." It wasn't a lie, he was tired, but he also knew that spilling out what was really bothering him would do little good. Just like Misty had, May would assure him that his worries for everyone else were unfounded, that it was their choice to be there. Their choice or not, he was still going to worry endlessly.

That, and he was pretty sure the air was stale down in that tunnel.

"So, I have a question." There was a lightness to May's voice that caught his attention. "It's a bit random."

"Go for it."

"So, I was there when you and Misty started dating. Like, I remember just watching you two at Cameron Castle and later on too, but I guess I just...I'm just curious about how you realized you liked her as more than a friend?"

May was right, that question was random. "Did she ever actually tell you what happened at the Tree of Beginning?"

"You saving her? Her kissing you? Yup. I got that one out of her a long time ago. It's your side I'm curious about." She really wasn't trying to pry that much.

Ash thought for a moment. "I don't remember a time when I started liking Mist. I mean, I remember back when we first met, we could barely stand each other but I don't remember when that stopped. At all. When we went back to Pallet Town after Cameron Castle, I was just super confused about everything. Can you blame me?" She shook her head but didn't say anything,

silently urging him to continue. "I guess...it was when I thought she was dead when we were at Dr. Young's lab. That's when I really got clued in I think." He shrugged his shoulders. "Just kind of grew from there. Why?"

She suddenly looked away, her cheeks going red. "Oh, no reason. Just trying to pass the time." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Don't give me that look." May pouted and looked down, only to see Pikachu giving her the exact same expression. "Gah! Really?"

"Pi pikachu pi pika pika pikachu pi pika cha ka cha." Pikachu spoke rapidly, waving his hands around.

"He says that he bets his ketchup stash that this is about Drew." Ash's brow furrowed. "Wait...what ketchup stash?" Pikachu rubbed the back of his head and grinned weakly.

May completely ignored their exchange, her face heating up. "I do not like Drew! That would be weird! He doesn't like me anyway."

Ash snorted. "Sure, May." He had to admit, he wasn't always perceptive about people liking other people amongst other things, but even he caught onto Drew's motives, and that was before releasing his Aura.

"Don't you think I'm too young to like someone that way?" She asked after a few moments of silence.

"You're the same age I was," Ash pointed out. It'd make him a hypocrite to say no. He cared a lot about his friends and could be overprotective of them at times, but this wasn't one of those times.

"I am, aren't I?" She laughed. "That's weird to think about."

"Pikapi, pi pikachu." The Pokémon pointed ahead of them.

Ash took a deep breath and perked up a bit. "Hey, the air is getting fresher."

"That must mean we're getting close to an entrance, right?" May couldn't contain her excitement. She just wanted to be out of the stupid tunnel, even if it meant going back out into the rain.

He didn't answer, hurrying down the tunnel until there was nowhere else to go. Ash blinked and looked around, shifting the Aura Sphere in his hand. That's when he saw them, tucked close against the wall. He held up the glowing sphere and edged his way towards his discovery.

"So, how do you feel about climbing up the staircase of doom?" There was little doubt in his mind that it was a staircase he was looking at, but it was old and had definitely seen better days.

"We started in a dead end," May pointed out, leaning forward to look up. "It's going up there or going back." She paused. "And if we find anything strange up there, no touching objects that are possessed by evil. Got it?"

Ash rolled his eyes as he tested his weight on the bottom stair. He was quite a bit heavier than May, so if it could hold him, it could hold her. "That only happened twice. One was an accident and one was a last resort." He walked up a couple more, and though they were narrow, it wasn't quite as treacherous as he anticipated.

"Twice? You got possessed twice?" May was completely flabbergasted by this revelation.

"Pi pikachu." The Pokémon shook his head as May held him in her arms.

"Yeah, we don't talk about it," Ash said off-handedly as he took a few more steps up. "I think we're good. Let's see where this goes."

"Hopefully out." They both got the distinct feeling that it wasn't going to be that easy. It never was.

...

Gary and Leaf had been fortunate enough not to fall straight down. Instead, they ended up on some kind of polished stone ramp that sent them flying down into another cavern. They fished out their flashlights and both were pretty astounded by what they found.

The carvings on the walls in the last room paled in comparison to these. There wasn't an inch of space that was untouched by words and images, and even as they walked forward, it was enough to distract Gary. Sure, he was worried about his friends too, but something like this was a once in a lifetime find.

Leaf, on the other hand, was really annoyed. She wanted to keep going forward as quickly as they could. There was no telling how long they'd be walking, and she didn't want to be stuck down there without any light. The problem was that Gary kept lagging behind, staring at the different designs.

"Why does it keep mentioning four?" Gary asked. It was a rhetorical question that he couldn't help but say out loud, as if the universe would provide him with an answer. He couldn't read the language, but a couple of the symbols looked very similar to ones from a language that he had studied before. They might not have been numbers at all, but he got the feeling that they were.

"Probably means you have four seconds to catch up before I throw my flashlight at your face," Leaf said, turning around and shining her flashlight at him just as he raised his hand to touch the wall.

"What are you doing? Don't touch it!" He jumped back and stared at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Don't give me that look! You touching stuff is the reason we're here!"

Gary wanted to argue with her, but he found that he couldn't. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders and looked at the wall. "I guess I just want to focus on something else for a little while. Not trying to save a world. Just a puzzle."

"Can you puzzle things and walk at the same time? I don't want to get stuck in the dark."

"Might miss things. Come look at this. Just for a second." Leaf sighed and walked over to Gary's side. He tilted his flashlight up the wall. "See there, it's that same symbol but this time with four pictures with it. It must be what it means. I get that you're not interested in this, but it's actually a huge find."

"Four...Rapidash?" Leaf asked, squinting at the ancient pictures. It certainly looked four Rapidash, but maybe a little different.

"Maybe. Or whatever Pokémon came before Ponyta and Rapidash."

"So you could just be looking at someone's farm inventory?"

Gary hesitated. Yes, he could very well be looking at something like that. It wasn't uncommon for ancient findings to consist of things like that. "It could be."

She crossed her arms in front of her. "Gary, someone could be hurt. We have no idea what other traps could be in this place, where anyone else is, or where we're doing."

"I'm well aware of that. What's your point?"

"You were the one flipping out earlier about just sliding down a hill. Now you don't care at all, happy to just stare at your stupid doodles on the wall." Leaf turned around and started walking away from him.

Gary wasn't ready to let her just walk away from this. He looked away from the writing on the walls and followed her instead. "What's this really about?"

"You're being a jerk, plain and simple."

"No, that's not it."

She didn't answer for a little while, but eventually she let her arms drop to her sides. "I doubt your dad ever got around to telling you about the stories from when he was younger, but my mom lived in the memories." She looked up at the walls as she walked. "She told me one about how she and your father got trapped together kind of like this. There was a cave-in. Red and Yellow...Delia, were on the other side." It was still strange to think that this fourth person that sometimes popped up in her mother's stories had been Delia Ketchum all along. "She said that they almost killed each other. Of course, she couldn't let it end in a funny way. You know her, right? This cave just got me thinking about it."

"Thinking about what exactly?"

Leaf opened her mouth for a moment, not quite sure what to say. "I think my mom was in love with your father at one point."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No. That's probably why she was a little meaner to you when we were younger. Anyway, being down here just made me think of that. It bothers me, for some reason."

"Because we could have ended up being siblings?" The idea actually did gross Gary out a bit.

"No, it wouldn't have been us, right?" She shrugged her shoulders. "They fought Team Rocket in the past. You know the stories."

"Everyone does," he agreed as he walked beside her. "Red meddled with Team Rocket pretty much since he left home. My dad was his rival and kind of got dragged into it. Your mom was a wild card who stole her Squirtle from Gramps. Somehow they all ended up getting involved. Then Red disappeared."

"Team Rocket had a hand in it. You know, Yellow was the one that found him. Mom told me that somehow Delia was given his Pokédex and his Pikachu, and went to find him. Not long after that, Red became the Kanto Champion."

"Then the issues with Team Rocket got real and they brought them down."

"With a lot of deaths along the way." She shook her head, frowning. "We're fighting with Team Rocket now. None of them got any type of real happy ending. They all just...suffered and suffered some more."

Gary quickly put it all together. "You're telling me walking through a cave ended up making you think about all of us ending up miserable?" He really had to wonder how her mind worked at times.

"Never mind, it's stupid."

"No." He reached out, putting his hand on her shoulder. She tensed up beneath his touch as he forced her to face him. "Look, just because bad things happened back then doesn't mean that we're going to get a bad ending. That's not how it works. If he was here, Ashy-boy would tell both of us to think positive."

"Maybe." her voice wavered as she took a step away from him and his hands fell from her shoulders. "But maybe we should expect everything to end badly. If you expect the worst, at least you're prepared for it. Anything better is...well...better." Once again, she turned and kept walking away, keeping her flashlight pointed in front of her.

Gary watched her for a moment. Watched the way her shoulders were tensed up and she kept one arm across her stomach as if half-heartedly trying to hug herself. He frowned and hurried to catch up to her, completely forgetting about the runes within the tunnel. "That's a pretty sad way to look at things."

"Yeah." She nodded her head. "But it might be the safest."

...

"Marill mar!" Marill came to a stop, her eyes going wide as she jumped up and down excitedly.

"What's wrong?" Serena asked, brow furrowing.

Misty studied her Pokémon's movements. She bit her lip, concentrating on what her friend was trying to tell her. "Oh!" She snapped her fingers. "Do you feel that?" Her green eyes flickered to Serena. "The air current?"

Serena wet one of her fingers and held it up in the air. A smile appeared on her face and she nodded her head. "Yeah, a breeze. It feels like it's coming from that way."

As the two teenagers and one Pokémon hurried forward, the tunnel became brighter as natural light managed to find its way inside. Misty switched off her flashlight, and despite the fact that their eyes were steadily adjusting to the new light, both girls still winced when they turned the corner and saw the entrance.

"Finally," Serena muttered and started walking forward, only to stop when Marill jumped in front of her, waving her stubby arms wildly.

"Marill?" Misty asked, but paused when she heard what the Pokémon was picking up on. There were voices just outside the cave.

Pressing a finger to her lips so Serena would know to be quiet, Misty slowly snuck forward, leaning against the edge of the cave and peeking around the corner. She jerked back quickly and faced her friend. "Team Magma."

Serena frowned and moved so that she could take a look for herself. Her cerulean eyes went wide and she took a deep breath. "What do we do?"

"I'm not—." Misty was cut off by Serena's surprised scream as someone suddenly grabbed her arm and jerked her out of the cave. The redhead ran forward, only for a tall man to grab onto her.

"Well, well, well, what are two pretty little things like yourselves doing here?" The man holding Serena was the one who asked, seemingly not the least bit bothered by the girl's struggling.

"Hey, I recognize them," one of the female Magma Grunts noted. She quickly pulled out a small

device and did something on the screen. "Huh, they're on Team Rocket's wanted list, though they're supposed to be with a few others."

"They must be back in the cave somewhere," the man holding Misty suggested.

Panic rushed through the redhead. Not for herself, although the situation alone was making her adrenaline run. She scanned the group, taking in everything quickly. It was a small group, with only one other man and another woman. Five in total. They couldn't overpower their whole group, but if they got them one at a time, that could be bad.

"Marill!" The Pokémon jumped from the cave and attacked the woman with the electronic device with a powerful Hydro Pump. She screamed as she was thrown backwards, completely caught off guard. Then Marill leapt at the other woman.

Misty felt the man holding her lose his grip slightly, and moved. She jerked back and down, using his own weight against him to flip him over her shoulder and into the other man. They both groaned in pain.

"Stop." The one word was enough to attract Misty's attention, and her heart leapt into her throat. The man holding Serena had a gun pressed to her head. For a moment, the stain of blood on her hair made Misty panic before she remembered that it was from earlier. "Make one more move, and I blow her brains out."

"Groin." Serena blinked at Misty's blunt word, somehow realizing it was for her. Before the man could react, she slammed her hand back into his groin. He cried out, letting go of her, and Serena jerked out of his arms, turning around and kicking him again to make sure that he was down.

The blonde breathed heavily, distracted by the sound of a Pokéball opening. She took a step back as a massive, absolutely fierce Gyarados appeared, roaring at the Team Magma Grunts. They tried to scramble back, but Gyarados was faster, tossing them all back into the side of the rocky wall beside them. No one got back up that time.

Just as quickly as everything started, it stopped. Serena took a deep breath and fell to her knees. She watched as Misty slowly walked towards the Grunts, digging through one of their bags until she found zip-ties. She used them to bind their hands and feet together. Once Misty was sure that they weren't going to get back up, she walked over to Serena, and flopped down beside her. Marill jumped into her lap, and Gyarados moved behind them, giving them something to lean against.

Neither one of them said anything, they simply sat there and caught their breath.

...

It was a fact that Ash was an active young man. It took a lot for him to get physically tired and strained, but after losing count of the number of stairs that they were climbing, even he was starting to get tired. In a way, it reminded him of the climb up the Space-Time Towers in Alamos Town. Just underground.

Pikachu had long since jumped out of May's arms so that the girl could hold onto the side of the cave. The staircase was narrow and the steps were small and steep. It would be incredibly easy to slip and tumble back down to the bottom. Instead, the Pokémon was sitting on Ash's shoulders.

He distracted himself with the thought of Pikachu becoming a giant Pikachu so that they could ride on his shoulders for a while when he felt it. Ash came to a sudden stop and looked up. "I think we're almost out of stairs."

If she were still ten, May probably would have whined and complained the whole way up. She still wanted to, but chose to stay quiet instead. When Ash stopped, she almost ran into him and had to grab his arm to stop herself from falling. At first, she was annoyed, but his words filled her with relief. "Oh thank Mew." Then she saw his frown. "What?"

"I think there's an orb up there," he admitted. "It feels like the ones I have with me, a bit different."

"You think we're in the Ancient Tomb?"

He shrugged and cautiously walked forward. Just like he expected, Ash soon hit a solid, straight floor. Pikachu hopped down from his shoulders and sniffed the air, tensing up a bit. Neither Ash nor May noticed this though. To May, the room was nearly pitch black, Ash's tiny Aura Sphere doing little to provide any real light. To Ash, on the other hand, the room was alive with lights and energy pulsating from an object just across the room from them. "It's right there." Without realizing what he was doing, Ash let the Aura Sphere vanish.

"If you're sure." May grabbed his sleeve before he could move so that they wouldn't get separated. She didn't like to think of herself as a fearful person, but being in the pitch black and not knowing what else was around them was eerie.

"Pikapi," Pikachu muttered from somewhere in the darkness.

"Don't worry, it's fine, I can see where I'm going."

"Pikapi!" Pikachu exclaimed loudly. May winced from the electricity that jolted from the Pokémon and over them, crashing into something.

Ash came to a stop when he heard something fall. He felt like his heart leapt up into his throat as he felt the other presence in the chamber, masked behind the light of the orb there. "Oh no." Lights lit up on the Pokémon, and Ash quickly tackled May to the ground to avoid a steel arm that nearly slammed into them.

They hit the ground and Ash twisted around, still keeping himself between May and the attacking Pokémon. A larger, brighter Aura Sphere appeared in his hand, the light glinting off of Registeel's body. "Oh no."

"Is that a Mirage Pokémon?" May asked, her voice trembling slightly.

"No." It took a few steps towards them. "It's not."

The Pokémon loomed over them, and Pikachu jumped at him, his tail glowing as he flipped in the air to use his Iron Tail. Registeel spun around quicker than something of his size and bulk had any right to, slamming his arm into the Pokémon.

"Pikachu!" Ash and May both yelled as he hit the floor and skidded across the ground, unmoving.

Ash scrambled to his feet and was about to run to his friend but Registeel got in the way again. He reached for his belt, tossing a Pokéball up into the air. Ria appeared and took in the situation rather quickly, stepping in between her trainer and the legendary Pokémon. She leapt into the air, slamming her foot into him to throw him backwards.

A second burst of light appeared along with Blaziken. May moved forward, a ferocious look of determination on her face. "Go check on Pikachu and get the sphere. We got this guy. Right?" Ria and Blaziken both responded positively.

Registeel moved towards him as Ash ran, but Blaziken lashed out to stop him.

Ash skidded on the ground beside his Pokémon and carefully picked him up. "Pikachu?"

"Pikapi," he muttered weakly. He hissed and jerked in pain when Ash touched his leg.

Ash closed his eyes, focusing on Pikachu's leg. He healed the cut that was there easily enough, but one of his small bones were fractured. There was no way for him to heal that and he had nothing to fix it with. Carefully holding his Pokémon, Ash muttered, "It'll be okay. Once we find the others we'll see if they have any pain killers and make a splint."

"Pikapi." Pikachu tiredly pointed at the wall that he hit moments before. Ash looked around and winced as the Aura Sphere revealed a splotch of blood on a crystal that was sticking out the side of the rock.

"That must have hurt."

"Pi pikachu pi pika."

Ash looked back at the crystal in sudden awe. He never even thought about that. Moving his hand, he actually pushed the Aura Sphere into the crystal. For a moment, everything plunged into darkness again. Then, one after another, crystals that littered the walls all started glowing, illuminating the room.

May didn't question it. She could see again, and wasted no time hesitating. "Blaziken! Keep using your Fire Punch! Ria keep using Aura Sphere on it!" Though the Lucario wasn't her Pokémon, she still listened. Registeel launched an attack back that the Pokémon and May all had to dodge. It slammed into the cavern wall and shook the entire thing.

Ash shielded Pikachu from the small stones that fell from the ceiling. Once the shaking stopped, he looked back at the fight. "Careful May! I think it's the Alpha Registeel! It's a lot stronger than any of the others I've seen!"

"Got it! Get the orb!" She wiped the blood from a small scratch on her cheek. "I got this!"

Right. The orb. In his worry for Pikachu, Ash completely forgot about it. Holding his Pokémon securely, Ash waited for an opening, and ran.

...

Clemont felt like they were going around in circles. Though he and Drew had stopped to rest, he still felt tired. To be fair, getting knocked out from a fall didn't always lead to a good sleep. Underground, there was no way to tell what time of day it was without their watches, and even with them, the darkness still made him sleepier than normal.

At one point, he wondered if it was maybe a Pokémon doing something to them. He eventually came to the conclusion that it was more of a mental symptom than a physical one.

Without warning, the cave shook under their feet, and both boys stumbled forward. Clemont landed on the ground, but Drew managed to grab onto the wall and keep his footing. "What was that?" The green-haired boy looked around with confusion.

"I don't—" Clemont was cut off by a screeching sound, like metal against rock in the distance. He looked at Drew, who frowned and leaned his head against the stone wall.

"I think it's coming from the other side," the younger boy said, taking a step away from it.

"So either we keep walking or we try to get through and see what's there?" Clemont asked rhetorically. He was trying to sort the options out. Funnily enough, he could almost hear Bonnie's voice in his head urging him to break through the wall and see what was on the other side. Serena's was the one that told him to wait a minute and think it through.

Drew was having similar thoughts about what to do. He had Flygon with him, and the Pokémon could get them through the rock with a little work and time. The question was if they wanted to do that. "What do you think?" Drew didn't know Clemont that well, but just from the travelling that they had done so far, he knew the older teenager had a good head on his shoulders. He would think things through.

"I think a cave shaking when we're underground is never a good thing. There's something over there. It could be a Pokémon, it could be a building, but it's something and we haven't seen anything else so far." Clemont rubbed his chin for a moment before nodding. "Let's go through it. Do you have a Pokémon that could make a hole in it right...here." He measured for a moment and then pointed at a spot.

Drew tossed his Pokéball up into the air and his Flygon came out. The Pokémon twisted around, taking in their dark environment with confusion. "How big of a hole do you need him to dig?"

"About 30 centimeters in and we should be good."

Drew nodded to his Pokémon, who was quick to move forward and start scraping at the rock. Once he was done, Flygon moved back beside his trainer. Both coordinator and Pokémon watched Clemont dig through his bag, piecing together some things that he shoved into the hole. "What are you doing exactly?"

"Blowing it up." Clemont straightened up and backed away a bit. "You might want to back up."

Drew and Flygon exchanged startled expressions before backing off. Clemont had a remote in his hands, and Drew was starting to wonder what he had been thinking about the blond being the sane one in the group.

"Three...two...one!" Clemont pressed the button, and nothing happened.

Ten second went by. Then twenty. Then an entire minute, and neither boy dared move. Whether or not the device exploded, it was still active now.

"Well," Clemont said warily, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "I guess I should—." He only took two steps towards the hole in the wall when the device finally exploded.

...

"This is just great," Leaf groaned, her flashlight pointed in front of her. They had reached the end of the tunnel, and since they started at yet another dead end, it meant that they had absolutely nowhere to go.

Gary could only see the back of her head, but he could practically feel the girl's annoyance radiating off of her. She whipped around and looked at him, crossing her arms in front of her while glaring at him. "What? It's not my fault the tunnel ends here."

"You got us down here in the first place!" Leaf yelled, throwing her hands up into the air.

"Seriously! First you were the one to pitch a fit earlier and then you had to go poking and prodding

at things and now we're stuck down here! We'll run out of air and die! Hell I don't know how we already haven't!"

"Would you calm down."

"Why? You're the only one who can get pissed off?" She shined her light directly in his eyes.

"Knock it off." Gary pushed the flashlight away. "Look, I'm sorry I got cranky and took it out on you guys. It's not like I wanted to. It just happened. I'm not sorry that I was curious though. This is an amazing find any way you look at it."

"That's always been your default, hasn't it?" Leaf asked. "Just take it out on others when things happen you don't like." She moved closer to the walls, shining her light around and running her hand across the runes.

"Really? You're bringing that up again?" Gary groaned, more than a little annoyed by this. "Fine, let's talk about that. I'm sorry that my parents died and that I took it out on Ash and you."

"Oh don't twist yourself into the victim!" Leaf snarled at him, dropping her flashlight to the floor as she faced him once again. "Yes, your parents died. Your aunt died. Ash and I, we were your best friends. We would have helped you through any of it! That's not the problem. The problem is that you've always taken your anger out on others even when they've just wanted to help so how the hell can you expect us to trust you not to do that now too?"

"Well what about you? You got scared and didn't want to be bullied like Ash was so you ran! How do we know you're not going to freak out and run away from us when we need you? Huh?" He took a few steps towards her. "That's not the problem though, is it? It's not the past, not really. This isn't about that fight or what either of us did to Ash or anything like that. This is about you and me right now. I might be taking my anger out on everyone else right now but you're still running! So what is it Leaf? What are you running from?"

The silence that surrounded them was tense and heavy. Leaf looked at the floor and crossed her arms in front of her stomach. When she spoke, her voice was much calmer and quieter. "I knew my dad. He was a bad person and he left. My mom was never really there even if she was there. My best friends were gone and part of that was my fault. I didn't know who I was or what I wanted to do with myself until I was older and now that's gone too." She looked up, watery eyes meeting his. "That's how it's always been and how it always will be. So it's just easier to run."

Gary always thought that he was good with words, but as he stared at Leaf, he wasn't sure what to say to her. She sighed and leaned back against the wall. Almost instantly, alarmed washed over her face as the stone she was leaning on sank back into the wall. The cavern started shaking, and they both looked up as the ceiling above them started cracking. Moving on pure adrenaline and instincts, Gary shot forward and tackled Leaf out of the way seconds before the ceiling above them fell.

...

"Blaziken, stop him!" May cried out to her Pokémon as Registeel tried to focus on Ash instead of her. Her loyal Pokémon was quick to leap into the air, bright flames surrounding its body. It slammed into Registeel and though it couldn't express its' pain, May could certainly hear it through the noises the Pokémon made.

"Alright!" She cheered loudly, pumping a fist in the air. It had been a long time since she fought in a battle outside of a Contest or practice battles.

Without warning, Ria jumped at her, tackling her to the ground. May shrieked with surprise as she slammed into the hard stone floor, and a split second later, the wall that she had been standing by exploded. Shards of rock flew in all directions, a couple larger ones slamming into Registeel and tossing the Pokémon into the opposite wall.

Ash stumbled from the explosion and Pikachu cringed in pain in his arms. That alone was enough to urge him to get up and move. He ran towards the shrine, holding Pikachu in one arm as he reached into the center of it with his free hand. Grabbing onto the smooth object, Ash pulled the orb out of the shrine, staring at the silver-hued sphere as the light danced inside of it.

"Pika."

Remembering Pikachu's injured leg, Ash quickly stuffed the orb into his pocket and turned to run away from the shrine. He made his way towards May, who was picking herself up off of the floor and staring at the hole in the wall.

May's first reaction to what she saw was confusion. A second later, it was annoyance. "You didn't have to come busting in like that! I had the situation under control!"

Drew blinked as he stared at the approaching girl, honestly having no clue what she was talking about. He and Clemont both looked around her at Ria and Blaziken. "Did a rock hit your head or something? You're not making much sense."

Clemont skirted around the two of them, heading over to Ash. He frowned a bit and asked, "What happened?"

"Pikachu got hurt. We got the steel orb. Registeel was here but you guys blew him to the other side of the cave. We should probably go now." Ash wasn't really in a storytelling mood, he just wanted to get out of there and get above ground somehow. Once they did that, they could make a plan to find the others.

"Okay, what about the clue?" Ash stared blankly at Clemont. "On the shrine? We said there's probably going to be one to tell us where to go next."

"Oh." He hadn't even thought about that.

The sound of metal on rock interrupted any train of thought that could have come to Ash at that point. He turned around, taking a few steps back as Registeel stood up again, walking forward and looming between them and the shrine. Though it didn't have a face to express any emotions, Ash could still feel just how angry it was. He and Clemont backed up until they were beside May and Drew. They could have run out through the hole that Clemont and Drew had come through, but they needed to get to the shrine in order to figure out where they needed to go next.

Flygon joined Ria and Blaziken, standing in front of the four trainers and the injured Pikachu. All three were tensed and ready to fight. Then the floor shook below them. Registeel stopped walking and tilted its body, as if it was looking at the floor. Then the entire thing crumbled beneath it and the Pokémon fell.

"What just happened?" May asked, completely stunned by this turn of events. No one answered her though, the crack in the floor continued on to the wall, it broke open the side, and a wave of fresh air hit them all. It might not have been the way the builders of the Ancient Tomb intended on people getting in and out, but it was just what they needed.

Once the shaking stopped, Ash turned and handed Pikachu to May. He then took a couple cautious

steps across the floor, waiting to see if it would crack under his weight. When nothing happened, he turned back to the others. "I think we're good!"

"Ash?"

The teenager blinked and took a few steps towards the hole. He expected to see Registeel laying below, which it was, alive but knocked out, but he didn't expect to see Gary and Leaf staring back up at him. "How...?" He just waved his arms, not quite sure how to word his question.

"Flygon can get them out," Drew said, and his Pokémon wasted no time in flying down towards the trainers trapped below.

"Here," May handed Pikachu back to Ash. "Clemont and I can go and check the shrine." The blond nodded in agreement, and they hurried around the hole in the ground.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu asked, ears twitching slightly.

"I guess we're making that hole bigger so we can get out," Ash said, glancing over at Ria. She shrugged her shoulders and followed him over in that direction.

No one voiced it, but they were all thinking something similar. If something wasn't herding them around, then they had an incredible streak of luck going on. No one wanted to voice that thought though, because no one wanted to jinx it.

Who knows what would happen if that luck ended?

...

Serena grunted as she fell to the ground, grabbing at the grass with frustration. She looked back up at Misty, who was holding out her hand. Though she remained unimpressed, Serena still grabbed her hand and let the older girl tug her up off of the ground. "I can't get it!"

Misty laughed slightly. "I practiced for years before I finally got some of these moves down. Don't worry about it, we'll keep working on it!" While waiting for the others, Serena expressed an interest in learning some of the self-defense moves that Misty knew, and the redhead was all too happy to help out.

Marill suddenly hopped up and down happily. She ran forward towards the entrance of the cave, just as everyone else walked out of it.

Ash glanced at the Team Magma grunts, still tied up and knocked out (they woke up once but Misty took care of that again) and raised an eyebrow before looking at Misty. "Do we want to know?"

"I could ask the same thing about you guys." She eyed just how tired, dirty and beat up everyone was.

"We got the orb, and now we need to go to 'the place that burns hot as the sun'," May informed them. "But we need to patch Pikachu up and I think I could sleep for a week." She had intended on just falling on the ground once she got outside, but that was the last thing she wanted to do in front of some Team Magma grunts.

"Let's go somewhere else and set up camp," Clemont suggested.

"Yeah, we can swap stories on the way there," Serena agreed. No one else bothered to protest,

leaving the Ancient Tomb and the Team Magma Grunts behind.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

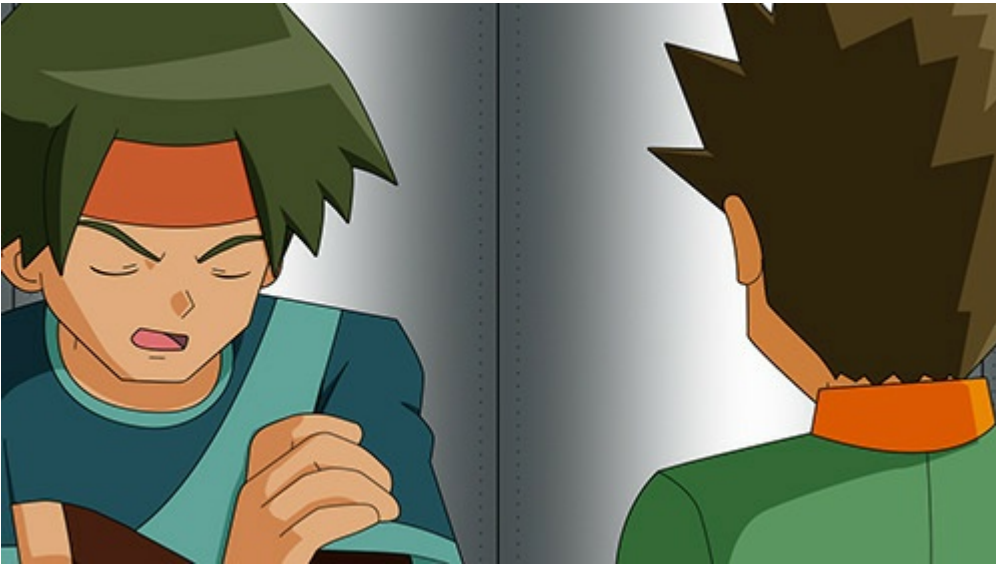
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Edited by: EchidnaPower

A Glimpse Of The Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Delia didn't bother with the television anymore. She tried to watch it at first, in case something involving Ash came up, but it was clear that Team Rocket's reach went farther than she ever anticipated. League secrets were starting to be leaked, and the media (obviously influenced by Team Rocket) was making a big uproar about the legendary Pokémon attacking more in the last few years, none of the regional leagues helping and Master Red being nowhere in sight for any of them. Of course that wasn't always true, but the more negative an image that the news could paint, the better. They were praising Giovanni's control over the legendary Pokémon (fake ones, but no one else knew that) as the beginning of an era of peace.

Disgusted, she stopped watching it, but for some reason that day, she actually decided to sit down with Grace to watch the news. Delia didn't know what prompted her to do that, but she couldn't deny it.

"It's sick, isn't it?" Grace asked, sipping at her drink. "I don't see how anyone could believe it."

Delia's brow furrowed and she wet her lips. "I can." Grace looked at her. "That's how Team Rocket wins. It always has been. They prey on the young, the impressionable, and suck them into their lies. You'd think that they'd be able to tell right from wrong but it's never that easy." She shook her head. "Most of the Grunts you'll meet are young. Just going through the motions because they were impressionable, they fell in with the wrong people, and everything that was good in them is beaten, tortured and trained out of them."

"You sound like you know from experience."

Delia tapped her finger against the side of her glass contemplatively. "It never happened to me. But..." She trailed off. She wasn't sure how to explain this whole scenario.

...

A young girl adjusted her sunhat as she made her way out of the heat into the cool interior of Professor Oak's lab. It was a fairly new building, erected only a few years ago, and it was quickly becoming a hub for any traveling trainer to stop at. It was more than that for her though. It was

like a home away from home. Yellow liked it more than her home.

Normally, Professor Oak would be out feeding the Pokémon, a job she always helped with, but he wasn't there that morning so it was up to her. She didn't mind, but was a bit worried about the man. Especially since her father had rushed out of the lab earlier, speaking to the Professor in a serious voice.

"Pika?"

She jumped, her hat falling off of her head and hitting the floor. Yellow huffed angrily as her long, blonde hair spilled around her shoulders, and looked around at the creature that startled her. She blinked a couple times. "Oh, a Pikachu? Where'd you come from?"

The Pikachu cautiously approached her, sniffing the girl's outstretched hand. She giggled a bit, and the Pokémon tilted his head. He regarded her silently before suddenly springing into her arms and pointing at a door. "Pikachu!"

"You want to go in there?" He nodded.

With her free hand, Yellow picked up her hat and quietly made her way towards the room that the Pikachu indicated. When she got closer, she could hear her father and Professor Oak talking.

"Maybe it's nothing, Sam."

"If it was any other trainer, I'd believe that," Professor Oak replied. Yellow shifted more so she could see the two men. "Vanishing for months at a time wouldn't be out of character, but leaving his Pokédex and Pikachu behind? That's much more worrisome."

"And the Pokémon won't even try to cooperate?"

"He doesn't seem to trust anyone. He's the only one that would probably be able to find him. I reported it to Officer Jenny, but she doesn't seem worried at all. Says it's what trainers do. My son is off somewhere else, so I don't know who to send to try and find him."

Yellow quickly pieced together what was happening. The Pikachu that was cuddled in her arms belonged to someone else, someone who was missing. He could lead the way, but didn't trust anyone else.

Well, almost no one.

A flare of excitement rose up within her. Ever since her tenth birthday, she had been looking for a reason to explore on her own, to become a Pokémon Trainer. Professor Oak said he'd get her a Pokémon once things calmed down, but it never happened.

"Do you want me to help you find your trainer?" She spoke quietly to Pikachu, whose ears perked up. He nuzzled his face against her cheek.

Confidence blooming in her, Yellow strode right into the room, startling both her father and Professor Oak. Her bright brown eyes locked onto both of them and she said, "I'll go and find the trainer for you!" She saw her father about to protest. "I can do it! Professor Oak, you said you'd find me a Pokémon months ago! Pikachu likes me and I can catch some of my own too so I can give him back when we find his trainer! I'll even take his Pokédex if I need to!" She stared at them both fiercely. "I can do it!"

"Pikachu does seem to like you," Professor Oak noted thoughtfully.

"You can't be serious," Yellow's father groaned. "She's a young girl. Who knows what will happen to her?"

Setting Pikachu down for a moment, Yellow tucked her hair up into her hat. "I can pretend I'm a boy if that helps. Please? I know I can do it!"

"Sometimes Pokémon know better than we do," the professor said after thinking about it. "There's no harm in giving her a chance. Like you said, it's probably not a big deal. It's up to you though."

The tall man stared down at his ten-year-old daughter seriously. "Delia Bosque—."

"Yellow, dad," she interrupted with a groan. "I hate that name. Can't you just call me Yellow? Mom always did."

The mention of the girl's mother seemed to soften him a bit. "Fine. Yellow. You can go—."

"Yes!" She cheered, grabbing Pikachu and jumping excitedly. Her father didn't even get another word in, much to Professor Oak's amusement. Yellow and Pikachu stopped cheering and she looked at the two men. "Who is it I'm trying to find?"

"A trainer from here that went missing. He's a few years older than you." Professor Oak picked up the Pokédex and handed it to her. "His name is Red."

...

Grace gripped her cup tightly. "Red? As in Pokémon Master Red?"

"One and the same," Delia nodded her head, brushing her auburn hair away from her bright brown eyes. "I found him, and when I did, it wasn't what Professor Oak and my father expected. Not at all." She smiled bitterly. "He was a part of Team Rocket."

"Well," Grace didn't really know what to say to that, struggling to find the right words. "I can see why that's not common knowledge."

"Yes. But you know, between him and Amanda – Green – we got quite an insight to what the other side looked like, and that's how we brought them down the first time." Delia shook her head. "In a way, this is similar, but it feels very different. It's more violent and chaotic. But it's still reeling people in the same way."

Grace took a sip of her drink, trying to contemplate everything the other woman just told her. Her bright blue eyes turned towards the television, and she choked. Spluttering, Grace grabbed the remote and turned it up. "Clemont."

Delia's head snapped towards the screen. Sure enough, a picture of Clemont was on the screen, a description of him and a reward for finding him. Serena appeared next, causing Grace to inhale sharply. Leaf, Gary and Misty were all there as well. Delia was expecting to see Ash by that point, but what she wasn't expecting was for the reward for finding him being so much higher than the others. The reporter mentioned that they were last seen in Lilycove City in the Hoenn region, but Delia wasn't really paying attention to that anymore.

"Oh god," Delia dropped her cup to the floor, clapping her hands over her mouth. Grace sprang up from her seat, hurrying out of the room calling Meyer's name.

"Mrs. Ketchum? What's wrong?" Delia looked up into the violet eyes of the new worker, Tulip.

"Nothing dear, nothing," Delia assured her, glancing towards the television. Once they got through several other wanted people, they started cycling through the list once again, Ash appearing for a second time.

"Isn't that your son?" Tulip asked, sounding genuinely surprised. "Why would Team Rocket want him?"

"Because he's just like his father."

Tulip blinked, eyes narrowing slightly. "His father? I didn't know he was around."

"He's not." Delia clenched the hem of her shirt tightly. "But that doesn't matter. They both have the same good heart, and Team Rocket's afraid of people like that. Ones they won't control, at least not for long." She shook her head. "His father lost sight of what really mattered in the end, but Ash won't, and that should terrify them."

Tulip pursed her lips slightly. "That's good to know."

...

"Have you seen Tulip anywhere?" Tracey looked up as Brock entered the room, looking around for the woman in question.

"No, though I'm surprised you're not attached to her hip," the other man replied dryly.

"I'm trying to keep tabs on her the best way I know how." Though she was quite beautiful, there was something about the young woman that Brock didn't like. When he told Lance, the Champion simply said to keep an eye on her. He'd been busy lately though.

Brock took up this mission in the best way he knew how: fawning over her left, right and center. No one questioned it, though Tulip was clearly annoyed and was now avoiding him.

Almost like Brock's thoughts summoned him, Lance himself strode into the room, and for once he didn't seem as exhausted as he normally did. He strode towards them, his cape swishing behind him. "Brock, Tracey, I need you two to come with me for something. A mission."

"Us?" Tracey motioned between the two of them. "Are you sure?" They had been helping a lot, but in the areas that they were deemed most suitable. Tracey did a lot with maps, making sketches of suspects and things that he could put his skills to. Brock helped tend to Pokémon and injured people when they showed up, sometimes pitching in tactical advice when Pewter City was involved. They weren't necessarily given missions, just tasks.

"Positive. I need people who aren't official G-Men, who she's never met before."

"She?" Brock asked.

Lance stared at them both seriously. "You'll see." He turned to walk out of the room but stopped. "Meet me in the garage in half an hour. Get what you need, talk to who you need. Don't tell anyone where you're going or what you're doing." He left the room, his cape swishing behind him.

Brock thought about that for a moment. "I need to find Max and Bonnie."

"Why?"

"Someone needs to keep an eye on Tulip, and to be honest, I don't really trust anyone here. Not

really. Do you?"

"You. Professor Oak. Delia. Grace. Meyer. Maybe Leaf's mother. At least I know she's not a part of Team Rocket. That's about it." It was really unsettling and nerve-wracking to live amongst so many people that he didn't find trustworthy, but there was nothing Tracey could really do about it outside of leaving. That was something he just couldn't do.

"That's about it for me too," Brock agreed. "We need to warn them."

"I'll get your bag and meet you there." The two were roommates for the time being, so for the sake of time, it made sense for only one of them to go.

Brock, on the other hand, went off in search of Max. The boy was young, but that was all the more reason to prepare him, just in case. He got the sinking feeling that something very bad was going to happen, and it was going to happen soon.

He found Max reading a book, Bonnie lying on the floor out not far from him, scribbling a picture. Their Pokémon were sprawled out throughout the room, appearing just as bored as the two children.

Bonnie was the first to notice him, perking up right away. "Hey Brock!"

Max looked up from his book. "Oh, hi. What are you doing here? I thought Lance would have you off doing something important." He had been a little bit bitter that everyone overlooked him. He was a Pokémon trainer too, even if he was young.

"I do have something to do," Brock admitted as he walked over to them. "But there's something I need you guys to do for me while Tracey and I are gone."

"Sure!" Bonnie jumped to her feet excitedly. "Anything has to be better than nothing."

He chuckled before becoming serious. "You know that new girl that works with Delia and Grace?"

"Tulip?" Max asked, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, the fingers in his other hand twitching a bit. "Yeah, I know her." Keeping Brock away from her was really the only thing he could do to amuse himself lately.

"I've been following her for a reason," the young man admitted. "And I want you to keep an eye on her."

"Did she do something wrong?" Bonnie instantly became serious, and appeared almost tired. It was a look that Brock didn't like to see on a young girl. While she was shielded from nearly everything that was going on, being trapped where she was wore on her.

"I'm not sure, she might have. I think I've seen her before, but I can't remember. Keep an eye on her but don't let her get suspicious and don't confront her. If you see her doing something, get Delia, Professor Oak, Grace or your father, Bonnie. Understand?"

They both nodded their heads, eager to have a task but understanding the seriousness of the situation. Brock really wished that he didn't have to ask two people so young something like this, but there was no way around it.

He never got the chance to talk to Delia or any of the other adults. Once he met up with Tracey, they were both quickly ushered away up to the garage, where Lance was waiting for them. It all went by in a blur, and the next thing Brock knew, they were already in an SUV, pulling out of the

garage and speeding away. He was in the front with Lance, Tracey in the back, and not another soul with them. That surprised him a lot.

"Where are we going?" Tracey asked as he leaned forward.

"The airfield beyond Goldenrod City. Unfortunately, we can't just drive to our destination. We're visiting a very isolated island in the Orange Archipelago. You won't find it on any map, though Tracey, you may have heard of it. A cursed island with waters around it that are far too rough and cold to get to."

"Yeah, I've heard of that place. We were always warned never to go there. Not that anyone ever knew exactly where it was." He shook his head. "It was an urban legend."

"There are a lot of truths in legends, including this one. What's on that island is a high security prison that very few people know about. We don't even keep files on it in the league database, which is presumably why Team Rocket doesn't know about it."

"How's that possible?"

"Everything there is on paper. Everything electronic was only accessible by the Pokémon Master, and Red made sure no one could get into anything of his before he was taken."

Brock didn't like the sounds of this place. "If the league doesn't really know about it, does the government?"

Lance smiled bitterly. "No. They don't know a lot of things." He sighed. "They tried so hard to build something good, to give people everything that they wanted, but the politics need to change again. There's too much discourse. That's a debate for after this mess is cleared up. And we may very well have a way to do that where we're going."

"What kind of people do you keep at a place like this?" Tracey wasn't even sure if he actually wanted the answer.

"The worst. We were going to send Doctor Young there before he escaped. People who go here never see the light of day again." Lance jerked the wheel to avoid a Stantler that started to run to the road but stopped.

"Who are we going to see? If you don't mind me asking, and why bring us to a place like this?" Brock asked.

"You two are perfect, because I know I can trust you not to leak what we're doing. There's no gain for you two. You'll be someone different for her to talk to, someone to peak her interest and hopefully she'll cooperate and give us the information that we want." Lance suddenly laughed, the sound cold and bitter. "We had her for years. That last name...we should have done more than just a background check because obviously it would have come back clean. You can't discriminate against a surname though." It became obvious to everyone in the car that Lance was just ranting to himself at this point.

"Who are you talking about? What does this have to do with Team Rocket?" Brock was almost hesitant to ask. Clearly Lance wasn't okay with all of this.

"You'll see. And what does she have to do with Team Rocket? Everything."

...

There was really no good route to traveling through Hoenn anymore. Everything was either flooded or dry as a bone and there were very few in-betweens. This was especially troubling since none of them could actually agree on where they were going.

The hint in the Ancient Tomb was specific enough to prompt them to keep traveling west, but the problem was that it could be interpreted in different ways.

"It means Mt. Chimney," May insisted, fanning herself as they walked across the steep slopes of the mountains that surrounded Hoenn's desert. "We have to go to the place that burns as hot as the sun. What's hotter than lava at an active volcano?"

"I read the description too," Clemont argued with her.

"Why do you have to be so stubborn about it?"

"I'm not. I'm just telling you the most logical option."

"I'm with Clemont," Drew agreed. "The desert does seem to be the way to go."

"Of course you're agreeing with him." May scowled at him fiercely.

"I dunno Clemont, I think May might be right," Serena chimed in.

"See! She's smart! I like her!"

Leaf watched the four of them squabbling with one another, turning away as she coughed violently.

"Are you okay?" Misty asked her.

"It's the weather," she groaned. "It gets hot, then it gets cold over and over again back and forth. A little bit of this in spring and fall gets me sick but this just...ugh." Her shoulders slumped. "This sucks. Don't worry, I'll take more medicine later."

"Damn right you will," Gary agreed. Leaf rolled her eyes at him but Misty was more amused than anything else. Whatever they talked about while they were lost in the tunnels, it was almost like he was trying to prove himself now. From the moment she started sneezing and coughing, he acted almost like a mother Blaziken.

Misty thought it was sweet. She looked at Ash, her smile slipping from her face. He wasn't even looking at Gary and Leaf, keeping his focus on May, Serena, Drew and Clemont, who were still arguing with one another. May pointed her finger at Drew's chest as she growled at him, Serena had her arms crossed and was glaring, Clemont's fists were clenched and it was obvious that he was holding back his anger, while Drew just looked vaguely annoyed.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu spoke up. He still couldn't walk properly, and trying to balance on Ash's shoulder proved to be too painful for him. So they rigged up almost like a little sling that Pikachu sat in but Ash could still use his arms. This seemed to work for both Pokémon and trainer. "Pi pikachu pika pi."

"Yeah, I guess," he sighed, running a hand through his hair.

Misty reached up and adjusted the hat that she was wearing. Like when the sun had plagued them in Johto, Ash was kind enough to give Misty his hat since she burned much more easily than he did. Ash saw the movement and smiled slightly before it faded again and he made his way towards the arguing quartet.

"Come on guys, stop," Ash practically pleaded. "We're all hot and tired but this isn't helping."

They all fell silent. Drew ran his hand through his hair, Clemont and Serena both looked a bit ashamed for arguing so childishly, and May shook her head. She crossed her arms and asked, "Well, which place are we going to? You're the one that has to go no matter what. It's not like we can split up."

Ash shifted uncomfortably. This was exactly what Pikachu had reminded him of earlier, that he was probably going to have to pick. The thing was, he had no idea which one was right because everyone had a good point and he had nothing to add to them. Riddles weren't exactly his strong point and there was no way to sense which direction to go. Nothing was conveniently showing up to tell them where to go, so they'd have to choose themselves. If they got to one place and it was wrong, they'd have to trek all the way back to the other spot and the weather got worse by the day.

He looked over his shoulder at Misty, Gary and Leaf. His girlfriend smiled encouragingly. "I'll follow you whichever way you think is right. We all will."

A wave of warmth rushed through Ash at her words. Pikachu patted his arm and nodded his head, agreeing with Misty as well. Ash closed his eyes for a moment, trying to think. Mt. Chimney or the Desert Ruins? He opened his eyes, looking from May and Serena over to Drew and Clemont. "I think..." He looked back at the girls. "I think we should go to the Desert Ruins. I mean, Registeel had the last one. Maybe that means something?"

May looked disappointed in his choice, but Serena just sighed and smiled at him. "Like Misty said, we'll follow you whichever way."

"We should travel at night," Drew spoke up. "The sun gets too hot during the day, especially now. It's probably better to set up shelters during the day and try to get a bit of rest. Travel at night without the sun."

"I never thought of that," Clemont said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "That's a good point though."

"There's two things you learn growing up in Hoenn, how to swim and how to survive in a desert."

"You don't like water though," May mumbled and he shot her an annoyed expression. "What, you don't!"

Ash walked away as the two of them started arguing lightly. He sighed as he reached the other four.

"You did the right thing," Leaf spoke up. "Making a choice. We would have been stuck here for hours at the rate they were arguing." She brought her hand up to her mouth to block her cough.

"I just hope I was right," Ash replied seriously. Pikachu looked up at his trainer sympathetically, nuzzling his face into the boy's arm. At that point, a little bit of hope was really all they had.

....

Tracey stared out the window of the small plane as it started to descend down to the island below. Though he now knew that the stories of it being cursed were just that, stories, it was still eerie being so close to it. It was the one place that they were told to avoid in their travels, and it was why he never even brought it up to Ash and Misty on their journey. Not found on any map, the only way to know it was there was if you knew where it was. No one ever got on the island that Tracey knew of, and from above, he could see why. There were vicious, perpetual whirlpools all around

the islands, stronger and larger than any that Tracey had ever seen before. Even some of the strongest Pokémon would probably get pulled down in those torrents. After that, there was a sort of beach with sharp stones that rose from the ground like teeth, which would lead to a very messy end for anyone that tried to climb down the sheer cliffs just beyond them. No, this seemed like the perfect place to keep people out of. Or keep them in.

The cliffs didn't go to a plateau at the top, but rather they sloped steeply on the other side, surrounding the entire island like they were walls (reminding Tracey of Sootopolis City). Up in the air over this no-fly zone, it looked like there was a simple landing strip and an abandoned farmhouse there, which was odd since Tracey was expecting a giant prison from Lance's descriptions.

Then again, surely someone would have discovered it before if that was the case. Even though they were in a no-fly zone (due to the strong winds that often plagued the area), it wasn't like Team Rocket was one to follow those rules.

It was more than a bit startling to realize how big of a secret the Pokémon League kept all along. It also made Tracey wonder what else they were hiding.

"Make sure you're buckled up," Lance told them as they kept going lower. "The dangerous winds weren't a lie." There was no need to question his honesty on that from the turbulence they started experiencing almost on cue.

Tracey was more than a bit relieved when they finally reached the ground. Though he wasn't afraid of heights or flying, having willingly looked over the edge of helicopters a couple times so far since agreeing to help the G-Men however he could, he still wasn't a fan of the landings.

As they got off the plane, Brock looked around the desolate island, the harsh wind whipping his hair into his face. "I can see why they say this place is cursed." Tracey nodded in agreement.

Lance didn't say anything as he proceeded towards the farmhouse, his cape dancing around him. The two young men were quick to follow the Champion, who pushed the door open without any hesitation.

Inside, a woman jumped to her feet. "Champion Lance. I thought you were coming tomorrow?" She was dressed casually, like she just rolled out of bed that morning and never properly got ready for the day. It occurred to Tracey that if someone did land there by happenstance, they needed some sort of excuse for the house being there at all. From the equipment around the room, he'd say that they were going with weather research.

"Can't be too careful. We think those lines are secure, but it's better to prepare for the worst." He pushed aside what looked like a normal picture revealing a strange device. He pulled a strand of his hair and set it on top. The machine whirred to life, lighting up with a bright green glow. "Brock, Tracey, just put a piece of hair there. DNA purposes."

"That's crazy," Brock said, but followed orders.

"Nobody takes risks here," Lance explained, watching Tracey do the same. There was a loud hissing sound as a wall slid away, revealing what looked like an old mine lift. He walked inside and motioned for them to follow him. The woman nodded at them as the wall slid shut and they started to descend.

"This is what you use?" Brock asked, gripping the edge of the rickety device.

"Not exactly." It stopped and what looked like a stone wall slid open, revealing an actual elevator. He led them over into that one and they continued to descend. "This is basically just the visitor's entrance. Workers are generally teleported in and out. There are a couple emergency exits as well. Like I said, top security."

"How do you pay for this? And how do only a few people know about it?" Brock asked, in awe. "I've never been one for the death penalty, but isn't this a lot more expensive?"

"Yes." Lance didn't offer up anything other than that. They fell into silence and the elevator seemed like it was never going to stop moving. Once it did, the Champion of Kanto and Johto took a step forward just as the door slid open. "Welcome to the most secure prison in the world."

Tracey wasn't sure what he expected, to see a ton of cells out in the open, but it was pretty underwhelming. There was a large glass wall with desks on either side of it, what looked like security guards staring back at that. On the opposite side, there was a long metal hall with doors.

Once again, they provided DNA though they also did it above. In a way, this made Tracey nervous. These people didn't mess around, and it made him wonder about the types of criminals that were kept there and the type that they were meeting up with.

Once they were through the doors, Lance led them down the hall and by the unmarked doors. "We call this place the Ghost House."

"Ghost House?" Tracey asked.

The Champion nodded. "As morbid as it is, anyone who comes here is here until they die. Some have tried to escape, but they all die when they do. The prisoners have no access to the outside world. No calls. No access to technology. Nothing."

"How do you hide something like this then?" Brock asked, trying to get more information even though Lance had been less than forthcoming earlier.

"Their deaths are staged when we take them in," Lance explained simply enough. "They're given a private trial with the Master and the Champions, then they're put here. To the rest of the world, they're dead."

"How is this legal?" Again, Lance chose not to answer that.

They finally entered a door, going into a large room with several armed men and women in it. "Is she ready?"

"Yes sir. She's in the interrogation room."

Lance nodded for Brock and Tracey to follow him into the room. Both of them had built up different versions of who they were going to see, agreeing that it must be some drooling psychopath. Who was sitting behind the table was the last thing that they expected.

The old woman had snow white hair that flipped out on the ends. Her skin was pale, her frame skinny (though she didn't look malnourished). For a second, Tracey thought that the League had really gone insane and locked up a little old granny, but then he saw it. Her dark eyes were sharp and cold. She held herself with a confidence that apparently never faded over the years (Lance did mention that she was captured a long time ago). In a way, it was like meeting imprisoned royalty. A cruel tyrant that hid within a frail form.

"Ah, Lance. What an honour. So rarely do I get visits from you or Red for that matter. It's quite

rude." Her eyes slid over to them, and Tracey instantly felt uncomfortable. "And who is this? New recruits that you're taking to see the big bad?"

"They're not G-Men," Lance answered honestly. "Not really. They're trainers. Consultants. I thought that maybe you could use someone new to talk to."

"Bringing new toys to tempt me, how lovely." She motioned to the table like she had invited them there. "Come, sit and talk to Madam Boss." There were only two seats, and at Lance's nod, Tracey and Brock both sat down.

"Madam Boss?" Brock repeated slowly.

"Oh yes, that's what they call me." She smiled, revealing perfect white teeth. "And what might I call you?"

Once again, Brock answered first, clearly willing to go along with whatever game Lance was playing. "Brock."

"Tracey," the green-haired man added.

"Brock and Tracey. Interesting names. Tell me, what did you do to get here? So few come and see me. Though I do quite appreciate Agatha's visits. The old Zubat has always been fun to spar with. Why didn't you bring her?"

"She's dead," Lance answered her.

"Oh. I always knew old age would take her first."

"She was killed," the Champion said shortly. "Went down fighting to her last breath."

That actually seemed to startle Madam Boss momentarily before she composed herself. "As she should. We may have been enemies, but I had respect for her." She leaned back, making herself comfortable as her dark eyes met Tracey's. "You should always respect your enemies, otherwise it makes you arrogant and stupid."

Tracey almost jerked up in his chair. Though the words weren't familiar, her eyes and demeanor finally clicked together in his mind. He almost gaped at Lance with surprise, finally understanding what was going on and why they were talking to this woman. "It does. Which is how and why we're here now. You were the founder of Team Rocket after all, weren't you?"

"Ah so he did tell you. Good." Madam Boss seemed quite pleased with this revelation. "It's good to know that the young still know it's name."

"It's hard not to these days." If Brock was shocked by the realization of who they were talking to, he hid it and he hid it well. "With what's been happening."

Lance took the opportunity to slink into the conversation, standing between Brock and Tracey. "Sylvia."

"What?" This time Madam Boss was clearly startled and unable to hide it.

"We tried to find you for years, to put a name to you beyond just 'Madam Boss'. Thanks to your son, we finally have one. Sylvia Rocketti. You and your son hid in plain sight. It was smart and it worked, but thanks to his actions, we were able to actually track your civilian records. We know everything about you." Lance spoke clearly.

"What did that idiot child of mine do now?" She scowled fiercely, not bothering to deny the truth.

"Took over Kanto by using fake legendary Pokémon," Brock spoke bluntly.

"Worked with other Teams in other regions to kill legendary Pokémon there," Tracey added.

"They've killed thousands of people."

Sylvia stared at them for a moment before shaking her head and laughing almost hysterically. It took her a few moments to compose herself before looking at them. "Oh I once had great dreams for Team Rocket. We would rule Kanto through the shadows. Play the money and the politics and get whatever we wanted. We'd have all the influence, until my greatest mistake in that trainer. In Red. Or so I thought. Perhaps my greatest mistake was leaving my wonderful organization to that idiot son of mine." She leaned back carelessly. "We were never meant to be genocidal or destroy the world. We were meant to imprint on everything that existed without anyone else knowing."

"Your son is a loose cannon who has no idea what he's actually dealing with here," Lance insisted. "We want you to give us everything on him. His past. What type of person he was in Team Rocket. Everything. If he had a cold when he was five, I want to know about it."

She raised an eyebrow. "Idiot he may be, he is still my son and I am still his mother. Why would I turn on him?"

Tracey and Brock both looked at Lance curiously. She had a very good point about that. There was no reason for her to tell them anything.

"Because I'm willing to give you the one thing you crave more than anything else," the Champion told her.

"What is that? The chamomile tea I've been requesting?"

"You give us everything on Giovanni, on the inner workings of Team Rocket from your time, and, to an extent, you get your freedom."

That definitely caught her attention. Sylvia straightened her shoulders and gave him her undivided attention. "My freedom?"

"Obviously you'd still be imprisoned, but we're willing to make your life a lot better. Television. Contact with others. A nicer bed. Activities. Time outside."

Those were some things that Tracey always took for granted, but looking around this place, he could easily see why it would be appealing. Another thought occurred to him. "You'd be the only one to ever leave this island after coming here. Kind of like a legend."

That seemed to fuel her ego a little bit. The corners of the old woman's lips turned into an amused smile. "You want to know everything?"

"Everything."

She leaned back. "I hope you have a few hours. This is going to take a while."

...

Domino, known simply as Tulip to everyone around her at the moment, slipped one of the items that she successfully managed to recover at Giovanni's insistence. Though there were no records of Ash Ketchum anywhere that they could locate (anything outside of his participation in the

Pokémon league and a couple other miscellaneous things) there were way to bypass systems to locate information about someone that was supposed to be hidden. They just needed the person themselves. Or at least a part of them. When she found the brush that had black hair in it, Delia laughed it off as Ash forgetting it but he rarely ever used one anyway, Domino knew she found her smoking gun.

So when Delia left to go deal with something else, she was quick to steal the brush again, putting it in a plastic bag so it wouldn't be contaminated. With her prize in hand, more information than she could have hoped to get, and Lance not being anywhere in sight, Domino knew that she'd be foolish not to run.

Plus she wanted to go before anyone found the present she left.

She slipped her phone out of her pocket and quickly dialed in a number. "Boss? I've got everything you asked me to retrieve. I'm leaving while Lance is gone. Sir? Yes sir. I got everything on Ketchum that I can. Yes I planted it. They won't see it coming. Yes. Yes sir. Yes." She hung up, lifted her bag onto her back and turned around, only to freeze. Violet eyes met bright brown as she stared at Delia Ketchum. The woman was shocked at first, holding a tray of cookies and just staring at her.

Then the shock was replaced by a fierce anger and she threw the tray at her.

Domino didn't expect the sudden move but was able to block it. Delia turned to run, and she cursed, running after her. Though the brunette clearly knew the halls better than she did, Domino was much faster and was able to catch up with her. She tackled her to the floor.

Delia fought back, kicking at her roughly. "I knew it. I knew you weren't on our side. I won't let you hurt him."

The blonde reached down to her boot and pulled out a knife. "No. You're going to help me hurt him." Then she slammed the hunting knife into Delia's side.

The woman's screams echoed through the hall but Domino didn't care. This was what she relished, something that made her stand out from the weaker Rockets who would avoid her with fear and disgust.

She raised her knife for the fifth time, but as she brought it down, it slammed into an invisible barrier, startling her a bit. She looked up and met the eyes of an absolutely furious Mr. Mime.

"Mime!" His eyes started to glow blue and she was suddenly thrown backwards, slamming into the wall with a scream.

"Bonnie!" Max appeared from behind Mr. Mime, kneeling down by Delia. He had been in the kitchen with Bonnie and Mr. Mime when the screams started. "Bonnie go get help! Your dad! Anyone!" He pressed his hands to Delia's wounds, trying to stop the blood flow.

Bonnie didn't question him. She just turned and ran as fast as she could.

Domino took the brief moment of distraction to escape. She wasn't stupid enough to face a furious psychic Pokémon, even if it was now trying to help tend to his trainer's wounds. It didn't matter, she realized as she folded the bloody knife and put it in her bag. She left with more than enough prizes to make it worth it. She'd relish those screams even after she died.

Back at the scene of the crime, Max and Mr. Mime were both keeping pressure on her wounds. Mr. Mime didn't have the ability to heal, something Max was quick to ask about. Instead, all they could

do was hope that Bonnie was running fast.

"Mrs. Ketchum, it'll be okay," Max insisted, blinking his eyes rapidly so that she wouldn't see the tears. "You'll see." He tried not to look at her wounds or his blood soaked hands, but the young boy also found that he couldn't focus on her face. Not with how pale it was getting and how her eyes were fluttering.

Max perked up when he heard footsteps. Looking up, he saw Green running towards them, Meyer and Grace not far behind. He breathed out in relief. "See, it'll be okay just like I—." He abruptly stopped talking when he looked down.

Her eyes were already closed, and Mimey wailed in agony.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

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Nightmares

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Clemont opened his eyes when he felt something jab his leg. He blinked his eyes several times before grabbing his glasses and looking back over his shoulder. Ash was on the other side of the tent, still asleep but moving and flailing around every once in a while. Pikachu was already awake, staring at his trainer with worried eyes before glancing at Clemont. "Pikapi pi pikachu ch pika."

The blond boy didn't know what Pikachu was saying, but he did know the word 'Pikapi' meant Ash and he was clearly worried, so it wasn't hard to figure out. None of them brought it up to Ash, but they all knew that he was having nightmares every night now. Sometimes he didn't wake up and didn't seem to remember in the morning, but when he did, he tended to stay awake for the rest of the night, trying to hide that from them.

Clemont was familiar with Ash's nightmares. Much like their current situation, they shared a tent while traveling around Kalos and Ash had them once or twice a week. He was about to reach forward to shake Ash awake, but quickly drew back when he saw a faint glow around Ash's hand.

Pikachu jumped up onto his paws (keeping the injured one up in the air, the other three holding him up), highly alarmed by this and that was enough to make Clemont move back a bit. Never once had he seen Ash start to lose control of his Aura in his sleep.

He had to wake him up before something bad happened. "Ash!" He cautiously reached out and shook his shoulder. "Wake up."

"Pikapi?" Pikachu nudged him a bit. When Ash didn't respond to either of them, the glow becoming brighter, Pikachu's cheeks started to spark.

Then Ash's eyes snapped open. He breathed heavily, the light of his Aura vanishing as his dilated eyes looked at them rapidly, like he didn't recognize them. Clemont opened his mouth to speak, but jumped back as Ash suddenly lunged up. He threw open the tent, ran a couple steps and doubled over, gagging violently as he threw up.

"Ash!" Clemont darted after him, the sounds of sudden rustling coming from the other tents. He knelt beside his friend, who was shaking as he heaved.

Misty practically materialized on Ash's other side, May not far behind her. Clemont looked around quickly and saw Gary and Drew watching from the tent they were sharing, Serena and Leaf watching from the last one.

Misty rubbed Ash's back and looked over him at Clemont. "What happened?"

"He had a nightmare, the worst one I've seen yet."

"Pikapi," Pikachu limped over, his ears falling slightly.

"He'll be okay," May assured the small Pokémon, sweeping down to pick him up and hugging him carefully.

Ash dry heaved a couple times, but then managed to sit up properly. His chest was heaving, sweat dripping from his brow as he tried to wipe away the tears. Misty tried to reach out to put an arm around him, but Ash jerked away from her. She was so surprised by the action that she pulled her arm back, watching as he looked at her almost fearfully. She couldn't remember when he had ever looked at her like that, and it made something inside of her squeeze horribly.

Ash looked at the ground and then closed his eyes as he breathed heavily. Once again, Misty carefully reached out, putting her hand on his back. He tensed up but didn't jerk away this time. Gary opened his mouth to speak but Leaf nudged him and shook her head.

Finally, Ash straightened up and looked at the darkening sky. "We should start getting ready to go." He stood up and turned back towards his tent like nothing happened at all.

Everyone else exchanged confused and worried looks. Serena looked at Misty and nodded towards Ash. Misty shook her head and spoke quietly. "Give him a little bit. I'll try to talk to him later. Just pretend it didn't happen for now." It was a bit unsettling, but even Misty knew that they had to give him a bit of space.

Pikachu didn't heed that though. He squirmed in May's arms until she set him on the ground, and hopped away on three of his paws until he got into the tent and to his trainer. His ears twitched as he stared at Ash, who was kneeling down slowly trying to roll up his sleeping bag. Ash looked down [at him and set the sleeping bag down, holding out his arms. Despite his injury, Pikachu was quick to scamper up into Ash's arms.

Ash hugged Pikachu close, nuzzling his face into the familiar, warm fur as he let a few tears fall.

...

Bonnie watched impatiently as her father knocked on the door and peeked into the room. He spoke quietly to someone inside, and finally pushed the door all the way open, allowing her to enter. Before she did, she glanced at Dedenne and said, "Wait out here, Pokémon can't come in." Dedenne seemed put off by that but nodded, sitting obediently by the door. The room was dim and quiet, only the beeping of the machines making any noise. It was incredibly unsettling.

Brock was sitting in a chair beside the hospital bed that Delia Ketchum was lying in. Tracey was over on Delia's other side, sketching something in his book. Though Brock forced a smile on his face when Bonnie walked in, Tracey just kept his eyes on his book.

Bonnie turned her attention to Delia as she stepped to the edge of the bed beside Brock. She frowned at the pale, still woman, watching her chest rise and fall. Bonnie definitely knew why Max decided not to come and see the woman. He had been the one to try and keep her from bleeding out. Instead, he stayed in the waiting room with Grace and Mimey. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Well...she got through the worst part," Brock explained. He didn't really want to say yes or no to something he couldn't predict. "I guess it's up to her now."

Bonnie frowned, brow furrowing slightly. She thought for a moment before crossing her arms in front of her and nodding her head. "Well, I guess that means she'll be okay. Ash is stubborn and strong and he definitely gets that from her, right?"

All three men in the room were startled by her optimistic response. Tracey looked up at her and smiled slightly. "You're right. That's how we should look at this."

She nodded encouragingly before looking at her father. "It's just like mama always said, right? She always told me to be brave, kind and who I want to be."

That question startled Meyer a bit. He frowned at his daughter. "Your...mother did say that quite a bit. I'm surprised you remember that." It was his wife's outlook on life, but he had no idea how Bonnie could remember that. His wife died when the young girl was only two.

"Dreams," Bonnie answered with a shrug. She looked at Delia again, reaching forward and taking her hand. "I hope Mrs. Ketchum gets better soon and doesn't go with mama."

"That was different," Meyer reminded his daughter quietly. "Your mother got sick. A lot of people did. Like Brock said, Delia got through the worst of it so far."

There was a knock at the closed door, and everyone looked as Amanda Green entered the room, tired and frustrated. She glanced at Meyer, nodding to Bonnie expectantly.

"Bonnie, sweetie, why don't you and Dedenne go find Max? He's just down the hall with Grace and Mimey." Bonnie wanted to argue and stay with Delia, but she knew that she had to go from her father's tone of voice. So she nodded her head and walked into the hall. Bonnie made a big show of picking up Dedenne and making her way down the hall, but just before she got to where Max, Grace and Mimey were waiting, she turned around and silently snuck back towards the room. As luck would have it, no one noticed as she propped the door open just slightly to listen.

"They're doing what?" Brock asked, sounding completely stunned.

"We do have some resources left in Kanto," Green reminded him. "They've been laying low, waiting on a plan. Recently, they've been getting gym leaders and their families out of the cities so that they won't become an example of punishment for what we're about to do." She paused for a moment. "There was a problem though. In Pewter City."

Through the small crack in the door, all Bonnie could see was Brock. She watched his face shift to one of horror. "My brothers and sisters? Are they okay?"

"They are. Team Rocket got wind that they were trying to sneak away and moved in to stop them. The Frontier Brain that went to help your family, I'm not sure if you've heard of her but most people know her as Pike Queen Lucy, she got them all out."

"Lucy..." Brock breathed out in awe. "Yeah, we've met. If they're okay what was the prob...lem..." He trailed off. "My parents are dead, aren't they?" The way he asked it was so matter of fact that it stunned absolutely everyone.

"They stayed behind to distract the Grunts while your siblings all escaped," Green said. "From what Lucy tells us, they fought bravely but were outnumbered. They held the Grunts off long enough though."

Bonnie had never met Brock's parents, though she did remember Ash saying something about Brock being more of a father to his siblings than anyone else. Still, she felt sick at the thought of anyone losing their parents. Hadn't they lost enough people already? It was a bit surprising to see Brock keep a straight face.

"Are they going to be safe? My brothers and sisters?"

"They'll be in the Battle Pyramid. Brandon has a cloaking device on it so that no one can find it, but even if they do, it's impossible to get inside. They'll be safe there," Green assured him.

"Why now?" Tracey asked, though Bonnie couldn't see him. "Why move them now and not a month ago?"

"In case Team Rocket retaliates against what we're about to do." Green sounded so smug.

"He's actually going through with it?" Meyer asked in disbelief.

"We let them think that they beat us, that we won't fight back, for too long already. We need to show them that we're not backing down. We need to hit them back. And with that intel on those bases that Madam Boss gave you...we have a way to hit them that they're not expecting." Bonnie heard Green laugh in a harsh, but still amused way. "Oh I'd love to see the look on old Gio's face when he wakes up and sees all of his Johto bases under our control and all his accounts frozen."

"So you got out the people that could be used to retaliate. What if he hurts just civilians?"

"Have you not seen the news? He's twisting this whole scenario, putting more blame on the Pokémon League than himself. It's disgusting. If he does that, people are going to lash out. No matter how much he twists the story, people remember the truth."

"When's Lance leading this strike?" Meyer sounded so resigned. There was definitely something he didn't like about the idea. Something that they weren't talking about then and there for Bonnie to overhear.

"They're already gone."

"And you didn't go with them?"

Green shifted into view, walking closer to Delia's beside. "We were friends once until she opted to just give up her past, to make herself into someone new to get away from all the bad. I didn't understand it. And later, I resented it, because she was right. She was right all along. Sometimes it's better to just disappear."

Bonnie heard someone coming down the hall and quietly closed the door the rest of the way, hurrying down towards where Max, Grace and Mimey were waiting. There was excitement flowing through her now. For weeks it seemed like they were just hiding, watching bad things happen. Now they were finally fighting back.

...

The walk through the desert was tense. It was a cloudless night with the moon shining bright, so they could easily see where they were going for once. This was something that would have normally prompted them all to talk a little, since there wasn't as much worry about pitching off the edge of a giant sand dune. The only worry they had from their environment was the wind that picked up every once in a while.

Surprisingly, Drew and Clemont were the ones leading the group. Clemont got his GPS working again once the clouds were gone, and they were actually able to track where they were going. Combined with the fact that Drew was starting to recognize some of the more unique landscaping, they were definitely going the right way.

Serena and May stuck together, both of them still of the belief that they should have gone to Mt. Chimney instead. They didn't brood on it though, and often spent their time talking about Performances and Contests, both girls expressing an interest in the other's specialty. Neither one dared to break the silence that night.

Leaf and Gary were trailing behind the group just slightly. Leaf because she was still sick, Gary because he was still sticking to her side like glue. The sound of her coughing and sneezing from time to time were the only things that broke the silence.

Ash and Misty were both in the middle of the group. Ash was the reason that no one was talking. Ever since he woke up from whatever terrible nightmare he had, the boy had been withdrawn, not talking to anyone or even making eye contact with them. Misty tried her hardest to comfort him or to prompt him to tell her what was wrong, but he shrugged off all of her advances to the point where she got mad. Now she was a mess of anger and worry that was bound to explode at any given moment.

No one had it in them to start a fight. Their trip through the desert was anything but easy. Sand was notoriously harder to walk across than solid ground or concrete. Not to mention the blowing sand and burning sun that bothered them while they tried to sleep during the hottest hours of the day.

"There it is." Clemont's voice cracked through the silence, startling them all. He and Drew stood at the top of the sand dune, staring down below them.

May and Serena exchanged looks before rushing forward, stopping once they were beside the boys. "Huh, I guess you were leading us in the right direction," May said almost teasingly.

"Always the tone of surprise," Drew remarked dryly.

The others arrived beside them, staring down at the ruins below.

"Yeah, but are we at the—?" Leaf tried to get the rest of her sentence out but was cut off by a coughing fit.

"Are we at the right place?" Gary finished for her, having to raise his voice a bit as the wind picked up again.

They all looked towards Ash, who closed his eyes, no doubt trying to concentrate. Pikachu's ears perked up and he twisted in Ash's arms to look at something behind them. "Pika!"

"One sec," Ash muttered to the Pokémon. Pikachu didn't appreciate this at all and actually bit his arm. "Ow!" Ash's eyes snapped open and he looked at him. "What?"

"Pi!" Pikachu pointed behind them. They all twisted around, faces twisting into ones of sheer horror as they saw the giant sandstorm creeping up on them.

"Run!" Serena yelled, snapping them all out of their shock. No one wasted any time rushing down the dune, slipping and skidding on the steep sand. They kept running to the main ruins, a building already half consumed by the desert.

There was a wide entrance that had been excavated long ago, most of the main halls cleared out in

the ruins there were said to be mysterious chambers below. The problem with those chambers was getting there.

"We need to cover the entrance!" Drew called out.

"I got it!" Clemont hit a couple buttons on his backpack, and the mechanical arm had popped out, attaching the large canvas material that he used to catch people if they fell to the stone walls. With the sandstorm falling over them and the canvas blocking the entrance, they were completely surrounded by darkness.

"Well then." May blinked with surprise, holding her backpack in front of her. She expected to have to rush to put up whatever sheets they could find so the sand wouldn't blow in. Clemont's way was much faster.

Ash held out his hand and generated an Aura Sphere so that they could see, but he flinched when it grew bigger than he meant it to, the sphere practically exploded in his hand, sending a light wave of energy through the room that they were in. Everyone stumbled backwards in the darkness, including Ash, who hit the wall and breathed rapidly. Pikachu squeaked with surprise at the wave of energy, but was luckily unhurt despite how close he had been to it.

"What the hell was that?" Gary's voice called out from the darkness. Ash didn't answer them, but they could all hear him breathing loudly.

Light caused them all to wince, but instead of the eerie blue glow that came from Aura, it was the yellow-tinted light from an ordinary flashlight that Leaf fished out of her bag.

Ash was leaning back against the wall, staring at his hands and shaking as his chest heaved. Misty took a few steps towards him now that she could see, but Ash quickly retreated away from her. "The orb's here," he managed to choke out. "I'll go get it." Much to everyone's surprise, he carefully picked Pikachu out of the sling that he was still carried in and gently pushed him into Misty's arms. Before anyone could protest he turned on his heel and was gone.

"What the ever living hell was that?" Leaf repeated Gary's earlier question, shining the light in the direction Ash vanished in.

"I thought he could control his Aura," May spoke, her voice wavering a little.

"It wasn't that bad," Serena pointed out. "We should follow him in case he gets into trouble." She was about to take a step towards the tunnel their friend ran off in, but May grabbed her arm and stopped her. "What?"

"Maybe we should let him go alone," the brunette said. She shook her head. "You've never seen his Aura get out of hand in a bad way, because what just happened was nothing." Her mind flashed back to the time when they were traveling in Kanto and Ash had gotten incredibly angry at one point. He ended up lashing out with his Aura, even if he didn't mean to. Luckily no one was hurt, but the destruction of the trees nearby was something May would never forget. The thought of that power actually hitting a person was something that worried her for a while after that.

It wasn't something she was proud of, but the potential of what Ash Ketchum could do frightened her sometimes. May's dark blue eyes turned to Misty, who was cradling Pikachu against her chest. May knew that the older girl would never admit it to anyone, but that potential frightened her a bit too. That was probably why she wasn't running after him.

Everyone stood, not quite sure what to do with themselves. Leaf's coughing broke the silence. She

groaned and said, "Let's move away from this a little bit. Just in case." She pointed her flashlight towards the canvas that was blocking the entrance, watching it ripple wildly from the wind and sand.

As they started walking a little farther into the cave, most of them pulling out their flashlights to see, Drew trailed behind them. He looked back at where Ash had gone. He was able to explore the Desert Ruins when he first started traveling, and knew how easy it could be to get turned around or injured. If the past few weeks taught him anything, it was that Ash's Aura was a great asset to stop him from walking into things, from objects that he'd trip over to traps. With what he had just seen though, he wasn't as confident as everyone else seemed to be that Ash would be okay.

That struck him as a little strange, and Drew knew that he wasn't the only one who seemed to think so. Clemont was hesitant, but trailed along after Gary and Leaf. Misty seemed almost torn between going after Ash and following the others, though she ended up hurrying to catch up with May.

Serena on the other hand didn't move from her spot. She bit her lip and looked back in the direction Ash had run off in. Drew watched her, waiting to see what she'd do, a bit amused when she turned around to go in the opposite direction of everyone else. He glanced over his shoulder at the others, but decided that it would be a much better idea to follow the blonde.

"Where are you going?"

Serena jumped, turning around and shining her light in Drew's face. She held her free hand over her head and scowled at him. "Don't do that!" Drew just stared at her expectantly and her scowl faded away to embarrassment. "I'm going after Ash. Whatever nightmare he had is really messing with him and he shouldn't be alone right now."

"You think you know what's better for him more than his girlfriend or two people who have known him all his life? Or even May who has known him for nearly four years?"

Serena looked like she was going to try to argue with him, but her shoulders just slumped in defeat. "Well...no...but..." She struggled to find something to say.

Drew just shrugged. "Well, come on then."

"Huh?"

"Let's go after him before anyone notices we're gone. I'm not afraid of whatever it is that everyone else is wary of, and I don't think you are either. Even if it's just because we don't know what it is." He was fully aware of his ignorance on the topic that was Ash Ketchum, who was apparently a lot more complicated than he initially thought.

Serena smiled and nodded her head. She turned back around, and with only their flashlights to guide them, the two of them made their way down into the tunnels under the Desert Ruins.

Finding Ash proved to be a lot easier than Drew and Serena thought it would be. Instead of the tunnel branching off into several others like Serena feared it would, it just kept going, twisting and turning but never forcing them to pick a direction. It was after one of these twists that they literally ran into Ash. He was leaning against the stone wall, hand gripping it tightly as he breathed heavily.

"Ash?" Serena called out to him. He jumped at her voice, causing her to jump back in turn. She couldn't remember a time when she had seen anyone sneak up on him. She knew, in retrospect, that it was due to his Aura, so it was even more surprising that they managed to startle him. Taking a few cautious steps forward, Serena reached a hand out, putting it on his shoulder. "What

happened?"

"Nothing." He shrugged her hand off and spoke much too quickly for either to believe him.

Drew moved his flashlight through the cave, settling on what looked like a freshly burned and chipped wall. "Did you do that?"

Ash's shoulders slumped. "There was a Zubat and I just wanted to ward it off but that ended up happening. The Zubat flew away though."

"And what is this exactly? Your Aura going crazy?"

Ash didn't answer, but he didn't need to. Serena took a step closer to him. "What's going on? You've had nightmares before but you've never done anything like this."

"Not around you guys," he admitted, turning and starting to walk down the tunnel. Drew and Serena exchanged quick looks before hurrying after him. "If I told you guys to go back, you probably wouldn't, would you?" Their expressions were answer enough. "Fine, just...if I say run. You run. Okay?" Ash looked back at the floor. "Aura's dangerous when it's out of control."

"Why is it out of control?" Drew asked again. Serena glared at him, because he wasn't exactly being sensitive, but from what he understood, sometimes the best way to deal with Ash wasn't by being sensitive and easing into a topic. Sometimes it was better to dive in head first. "If you don't tell someone what's going on it's going to keep eating at you, and you're going to end up hurting one of us."

"You know the move Surf?" Ash said suddenly. "How it hurts your opponent but if you're in a double battle it can also hurt your second Pokémon or your partner's Pokémon?"

"Yes?" A quick glance back at Serena told him that she had no idea where this was going either.

"That's what Aura's like sometimes. When you try to keep it in to protect people, when you try to squish it down, it ends up lashing out and going out of control and you can't choose who it hurts and who it doesn't." Ash shook his head. "I get it. I'm being paranoid and stupid but I can't help it."

"So you're scared to hurt us, so you try to suppress your Aura, and that makes it more likely to hurt us?" Serena clarified, and he nodded his head. "Why are you scared?"

Ash glanced at her quickly, looking over to Drew and then back in front of him. "My nightmare. It didn't feel like a nightmare. It felt like a warning."

"What kind of warning?" Drew prompted when he didn't say anything else. He tried not to sound annoyed as they walked through the tunnel, but he already knew that they were going to have to drag this out of Ash slowly and painfully. At least he was talking.

"I heard my mom," Ash said, his voice unfocused like his mind was somewhere else. "She was crying and calling out for me. She was pleading for me to help her. Then something came at me and I used my Aura and...and it was her." His voice cracked. "It was hurt and what I did...she was bleeding so badly and I was holding her...and it didn't feel like a dream. It felt like the other ones I've had in the past. The ones that mean something. She died. I was holding her and she died and it felt so real." His shoulders were shaking again. "Then I turned around and saw all of you and I knew it was my fault. It was a warning. I know it was."

Drew wasn't quite sure what to say to that, but he could definitely see why Ash reacted so violently when he woke up, and why he was so shaken.

Serena reached forward one last time, once again putting her hand on his shoulder. "I don't know much about your Aura. I don't know what it can do if it really gets out of hand, but I do know you and I know you're not going to hurt us. You said so yourself, when you try to push it down it just gets worse. You're not going to hurt any of us." She sounded so confident in this.

"I agree with her," Drew said with a nod. "Just the thought of hurting someone has you running. You don't have it in you to actually hurt us. And maybe some actions will lead to something bad, there's nothing we can do about that though." He stared at him pointedly. "If you keep being so distracted, you are going to hurt someone by accident, so you need to just calm down and stop."

"Yeah I know," Ash replied glumly, staring ahead of him. "That's what I was trying to do."

"By going off on your own?" Serena asked doubtfully. "You're horrible at doing things on your own." Her cheeks turned pink when she realized how bad that actually sounded.

Surprisingly, Ash actually snorted with amusement. "Thanks Serena." Though it sounded sarcastic, Ash truly meant it.

When he walked away from everyone earlier, it was genuinely to have some time alone to try and get a grip on himself. He just ended up making himself more and more paranoid. Serena was right, he really was pretty hopeless on his own. He was glad that she and Drew had come after him.

Looking at the younger boy, Ash smiled slightly. "Thanks Drew. And don't worry, I'll get a hold of it again." Almost impishly, he added, "May won't get hurt."

"May?" Drew was so startled by Ash mentioning the girl that his voice actually cracked. He cleared his throat and clarified, "What does May have to do with anything?"

"That's what you're so worried about, right? You're not one to worry about yourself," Ash pointed out.

"I noticed that too," Serena agreed, wanting to switch the topic from horrible nightmares to something lighter. She side-eyed Drew and grinned a bit. "You couldn't make it any more obvious that you like her."

"Tell that to her," Drew said after a moment of thought, not bothering to deny it. "May doesn't realize it no matter what I do."

"She really doesn't," Ash agreed. "So just...tell her. She's like me. She feels something but she had no idea what it is or what to do about it so just...tell her or show her. That's what Misty did. Then I got it. Well...mostly. It was really confusing and strange at first."

Drew actually considered that, because Ash was right, May was quite a bit like him in that respect. Not nearly as much as the blue-haired coordinator, Dawn, May introduced him to, who was more like a female version of Ash than anything else. It was still enough for Drew to think that maybe Ash was right.

"You should tell her sooner rather than later," Serena added. She shrugged her shoulders. "Don't just leave things hanging. Make sure she knows and if it doesn't work out, then at least you know and you're not left holding onto something that doesn't exist. Then you can start moving on."

The green-haired teenager nodded his head, acknowledging that he heard what she said. He kept his eyes focused on the floor as they walked, so he didn't notice the way Ash tensed up and then slowed down a bit, letting Drew walk ahead of him.

"Serena?" Ash said quietly, his voice wavering. "I don't think I ever said it but...I'm sorry."

She blinked with surprise. "About what?"

"Well...I just...I knew how you felt. Bonnie pointed it out pretty early on, but I...I thought I told you about Misty but I was stupid and didn't make it clear enough and I know it hurt you feelings and I'm really sorry about that part. That I did that." His words were rushed and almost panicked.

Serena understood then. He was apologizing for not being clear, for letting her cling to something that would never be. It was exactly what she just described to Drew, and it would be a lie to say that she wasn't referring to herself and Ash. At the same time, she knew that Ash would never apologize for being with Misty and not her. He had no regrets about that. His regret was not being clear.

"It's okay," she assured him, genuinely meaning it. "If you were purposely being a jerk by being vague, then I'd be mad. You just...you get so excited and proud about all your friends, especially Misty, that you forget to add that little 'by the way she's my girlfriend'. You know it's okay to say that, right?"

"I know. It just sounds...well Misty doesn't belong to anyone."

She shook her head. "You're doing it again. Being dumb. I swear you boys are all dense. You, Drew, Gary...all of you. It's okay to say that she's your girlfriend to people, it doesn't undermine anything she's done." Serena raised an eyebrow. "If anything it's more impressive because she managed to crack through your skull."

"Ha, ha, ha," he said each syllable slowly and dryly. "You're hilarious. But anyway...we're okay, right?"

"Of course we are," she assured him without any hesitation. "I'm a big girl and it's not the end of the world." She thought about that. "Well, not in that way at least."

That was a swift reminder that brought them both back to the present time and situation.

"Guys," Drew spoke up from ahead of them. "I think we're here."

The tunnel opened up into a large room that had massive stone tablets on the wall, a strange braille-like language written on the walls. Ash looked around, and said, "It's behind that wall there." He pointed in front of them.

"Okay, but how do we get through?" Serena asked him.

"Garchomp and Flygon would probably be able to," Ash replied thoughtfully.

"Maybe you could put that to use for once." Drew nodded towards his Mega Bracelet and Keystone.

"I don't have a Garchompite," he admitted. "Ria has a Lucarionite and—." Before he could finish, the cave started to shake beneath their feet.

The three of them looked at the near wall, watching as the rocks crumbled away, revealing a new entrance. They all just stared at it for a moment before looking at one another uncertainly.

"Well, it's definitely in there," Ash said, rubbing the back of his head.

"Yeah, and I bet Regirock is too," Drew pointed out warily, remembering how tough of a time they had with Registeel. He was sure that no exploding walls or collapsing floors were going to help them this time though.

"Chosen Ones first," Serena offered cheerfully, though she was a bit frightened by the potential of getting into a fight with a legendary Pokémon.

Ash inched his way forward, using his Aura to try and sense Regirock. It was difficult over the power of the orb that was there, but eventually he found the legendary Pokémon lounging in the corner.

Regirock shifted a bit, turning towards them. It slowly raised its arm, and Ash reached back for one of his Pokéballs. Then Regirock motioned towards the shrine that they could faintly see.

Ash just stared at it. "Uh...I can just...go?"

Regirock moved its entire body in a way that implied nodding, so he quickly walked across the room and to the shrine. He grabbed the rock orb, and then started looking around for whatever clue was supposed to be there.

"Sin—oh."

Serena and Drew both looked at the Regirock oddly and the boy asked, "Did it just say Sinnoh?"

It nodded.

"So we need to go all the way to Sinnoh now?" Serena clarified, receiving another nod.

"There's no clue up here," Ash said, jumping down from the shrine. He stared at Regirock. "I guess that is our clue." Regirock fell back to the ground, and he was actually a bit alarmed, thinking the Pokémon was injured or something, but then it started snoring. "Umm..."

"You know what, let's not question it," Drew suggested, motioning to the exit with his flashlight. "Let's just go before it wakes up and decides that it wants to test us or something."

Neither Ash nor Serena tried to argue his point. If they could avoid it, neither one of them wanted to battle the legendary Pokémon. The three of them took the opportunity to escape without any problems.

...

May was fuming when they got back. Her dark blue eyes snapped towards Drew and Serena, and she looked ready to dig in at them, but her expression softened when she saw Ash following them.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cried out, squirming out of Misty's arms and limping over to his trainer as quickly as he could. Ash squatted down to pick him up, holding the little Pokémon close.

"You got the orb," Misty said, shifting so that she was on her knees. Her sea green eyes studied Ash, searching for any cuts or bruises that dealing with another legendary Pokémon might have left behind.

"Regirock just kind of gave it to us," Drew said with a small shrug. "Didn't seem interested in fighting at all."

"Thankfully," Serena added, her relief palpable.

"Hey," Ash spoke to Misty quietly, trying not to get everyone's attention. "Can I talk to you for a minute? Over there or somewhere?" He motioned to a wall that was still in view of everyone else but far enough away so that they wouldn't overhear them.

"Sure." She didn't hesitate to take his hand, tugging him away from the rest of the group.

Serena smiled a little bit as she watched them go. She then situated herself on the floor between Clemont and May. "What were you guys doing while we were gone?"

"Huh?" May looked over at her, having been watching Ash and Misty. "We were talking about where to go next even though we didn't have the clue yet. Is he okay?" She motioned towards their raven-haired friend.

"He'll get there," Drew told her, sitting across from them. "What did you guys figure out, because the clue wasn't all that helpful."

"What was it?" Leaf asked. She was laying on the floor, but still turned towards them so that she could participate.

"Sinnoh," he replied dryly. "That's it. Just Sinnoh. There was nothing written on the shrine. Regirock just said Sinnoh."

"That's it?" Gary raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't tell us much."

"It tells us that we need to hop regions," Clemont said, tapping different buttons on a tablet that he had in his hands. "We were able to get a signal despite the storm and the rock walls. From the different warnings I can find, everything south of the mountains and north of Mauville is completely flooded, meaning we can't keep going south. To get anywhere we'll have to backtrack up north to Lavaridge Town and take the train from there to wherever it is we need to go. They're still running."

"Slateport," May spoke up. "We'll never get on a plane to get to Sinnoh. You guys are all wanted. A boat's our best shot."

Both Gary and Clemont groaned at this realization, remembering the trip from Johto to Hoenn and just how much fun that had been. May was probably right though. The best way to get to Sinnoh was probably by ship.

"Well, most of the really nasty weather is really centered around Hoenn," Clemont said with a small sigh. "Not that other places aren't getting it too, it's just worse here."

"So we go to Lavaridge after the storm clears, get on a train to Slateport, sneak onto a boat and get to Sinnoh, and hopefully no one notices us?" Serena asked, wanting to make sure she knew what they were doing.

"When you put it that way..." Leaf trailed off, not quite sure what to say on that.

"Doesn't really matter though, does it?" Drew pointed out. "Sinnoh's huge and we don't have the first idea where to go."

"We'll just have to figure it out ourselves," Gary replied. "And hope we don't get it wrong."

They all stared at one another as that thought sunk in. They knew which direction in general to go in, but beyond that, they were lost.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

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Where To Go From Here

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



For the first time in a long time the weather actually seemed okay. Not a single cloud blocked the stars and the moon, there wasn't even a breeze, and the air was warm and comfortable. It was a rare thing, since most nights either got too cold or too hot with the wind whipping around them.

Ash really liked this type of weather. He laid back on his sleeping bag, staring up at the stars with Pikachu on one side of him and Misty on the other. They were all trying to change their sleeping patterns back to normal (as opposed to being awake during the night and sleeping during the day while they were in the desert), but everyone else was having a much easier time of it than he was.

He talked to Misty about his nightmare, about how his fear made what he feared happen, and he did feel a lot better about the fact that it was just a nightmare and he hadn't hurt anyone. That didn't make the horrifying images go away though. He would get brief flashes of his nightmare, but he was never completely pulled back into it again, much to Ash's relief. He would still jerk awake, and instead of keeping Clemont awake, Ash opted to sleep outside instead.

Pikachu, of course, was a little tattletale and informed Misty of this. Instead of scolding him or anything like that, his girlfriend simply brought her sleeping bag out of her tent and laid with him. It was strange, but with Misty and Pikachu within arm's reach, Ash found it easier to sleep. It wasn't a total cure, he was still tired, but it was much better than nothing.

The warm night, combined with the fact that he was surrounded by people he cared about made it a little easier for him to get comfortable, but contradictorily to every other night, he just wasn't tired.

For some unknown reason, May and Drew ended up staying outside with them. Neither Ash nor Misty complained since it was always better to have more people around.

"So," May spoke up, trying to think of something to say. She was tired but the only way to get herself to sleep was to stop her mind from running a mile a minute. "What are you guys going to do when all this is over and we stop Team Rocket?"

"You mean if we manage to stop Team Rocket?" Drew asked, tilting his head so he could look

over at her.

"Did I stutter?" May demanded. "We got through bad times before and we can get through this too!"

Misty smiled. May's optimism was something that they could use a lot more of. Normally Ash would be right there with her, giving them all the encouragement that he possibly could, but he was still a bit shaken and unsure of himself. That was okay though. Misty could see the smile on his face, and that was enough for her.

"Yeah, well I guess I'll just go back to doing what I was doing," Drew answered, breaking Misty out of her thoughts.

"Will they have the Contests going again that soon? Or the League Conferences?" Ash asked curiously.

"Probably," the other boy answered with a nod. "Not only is it a statement that they're stronger than Team Rocket, that they can keep going no matter what, but when Contests and Leagues conferences are happening, the League itself brings in a lot of revenue—money. They'll need a lot more of it to repair everything."

Everyone was silent, thinking about that until Misty spoke. "That's what I think I'm going to do. I was so excited to leave home and be able to travel again so I could capture more water Pokémon and learn more about them away from my gym. Now...I guess I'm going to go home and help rebuild Cerulean City any way I can."

"Will you start running the gym again?" May asked curiously.

"I..." Misty wanted to say yes, because that was her family's gym, but it was so hard to imagine being there on her own. Her parents died not far from there, her grandmother died there, the aunt that she was named after died there, her sisters and unborn nephew died there. Her poor Pokémon were probably taken by Team Rocket at this point. She blinked the tears that threatened to well up away. "I don't know."

She felt Ash's hand on her shoulder and she glanced at him. "What about you? Going to chase after another league? You came so close in Kalos."

The Kalos League. Ash actually hadn't thought about that in a little while now. It was odd to think that it had been just over a month since then. It felt like years. Slowly, Ash shook his head. "No."

"No?" That answered startled everyone else, even Pikachu.

Ash shook his head and looked up at the starry sky. "Even before any of this happened, I started feeling homesick. I'll always want to travel and see the world and meet new Pokémon, make new friends, but..." He shrugged.

"But sometimes it's nice having a permanent place to stay too," Drew finished for him.

"So take on Kanto again after this mess is over," May said, startling Ash with the suggestion. "You can win, I know you can! And if not the first time...well...keep trying! Besides, being in Kanto keeps you close to the other important things in life, right?" She winked at him.

Ash laughed. "Yeah, I guess it does." He tilted his head to look at Misty. "I can do that and help you with whatever you want to do in Cerulean!"

Misty felt her breath catch in her throat. "You'd do that?"

He blinked and tilted his head slightly. "Course I would." The thought of not helping was a foreign one to Ash. It wasn't just because it was Misty's hometown, though that did add to it. He would have gone anywhere that he could be genuinely helpful. He probably would. Seeing Misty smile so broadly at the thought made his insides do funny things, especially when she scooted close to him, nuzzling her face into his shirt.

"Pi pikachu." Pikachu rolled his eyes and moved away from them, cuddling up to May's side instead. The girl giggled and pet the Pokémon.

A small smile slowly spread across Drew's face as he looked at May. "May?"

"Hmm?" She looked up from Pikachu, staring at him with curious eyes. They just stared at one another for a moment. "What?"

Drew shook his head and looked away. "What are you planning on doing after all this is over?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "But when I do, you'll be one of the first ones to know." A yawn escaped her lips and she smiled sheepishly. "We should probably get to sleep. Big day of hopping trains tomorrow."

"Yeah," Drew agreed, watching as she laid back down in her sleeping bag with Pikachu. Ash and Misty had already fallen asleep across from them, so he settled down into his sleeping bag as well. Slateport. He'd tell her when they got to Slateport.

...

When not a single person flinched at the pained, shrill screams Giovanni knew that the torture had gone on long enough. At first, people had been horrified, cringing away with fear, because if he could order one of his best agents to be brutalized because of a mistake she made, what would he do to those he didn't favour?

Fear gave him control, and that was really all he wanted over this situation. It was the one thing Domino had taken from him. If she had just abandoned her post at Blackthorn City like she was supposed to, he might have been able to get more spies in at later dates and the ones he had in there right now didn't have to be on high alert at all times. Domino effectively closed the window of sneaking more eyes and ears into Lance's growing group. And all because the cook heard her.

Giovanni was disappointed in Domino. He thought that he had trained her better. It would have been much smarter to capture the woman, Delia Ketchum, and use her as a tool to get her meddling son. Domino made that impossible.

"Giovanni, sir," a man said quietly as he approached. "The results from the tests have returned."

The tests, the one good thing Domino had done. She managed to bring back viable samples of Ash Ketchum's hair and Delia Ketchum's blood. Both were run through different tests because Giovanni wanted to know who he was dealing with. Any small detail mattered to him. This was the one thing that stopped him from killing Domino.

Though in retrospect, maybe that would have been kinder.

"Yes?" The man prompted.

"Well, the samples come from a biological mother and son—."

"Yes I knew that." Giovanni's annoyance was obvious.

"O-of course you did, s-sir." The doctor pushed his glasses up the brim of his sweaty nose.

"Something odd came up though when we ran Delia Ketchum's DNA through the system. Two files. The one with her basic information, and a sealed one that the intelligence team was able to crack open and...well I'm not sure what to make of it, honestly." With shaking hands, the doctor passed Giovanni the results of his work and stood silently as the man looked it over.

Giovanni read calmly and then did a very obvious double take and started over. His lips slowly rose into a smile that turned into a laugh. A hysterical laugh that set everyone who heard it on edge.

"S-sir?"

"Of course. I knew there had to be a connection somewhere, we were just looking in the wrong place all along," Giovanni said, more to himself than anything else. "And what of the boy's father?"

"We didn't run the paternity test. We thought you didn't—."

"I said it wasn't a priority anymore." Giovanni's cruel smile was gone as he fixed the man with an unimpressed stare that was equally as chilling. "Not that you shouldn't do the test. Yellow, that name means more than you know. Whoever her husband is or was, we need to know. It might hold more answers. Find him." It was a clear dismissal, and the doctor ran out of the room.

There was a moment's pause before the sound of heels clicking on the floor caught Giovanni's attention. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Ariana as she approached. "Sir, Petrel is in place. He's just waiting for your go ahead."

"Good," Giovanni said, looking down at the papers in his hand briefly before turning his attention to her. "And what did Proton discover about the retrieval of the Gym Leader's families?"

"There doesn't seem to be a motive for it, sir," Ariana answered. "None that our sources are telling us. If Lance is up to something, he's playing it close to his vest and not telling anyone."

Giovanni didn't believe that in the least. Some people might have thought he was just a madman, that his plans had no rhyme or reason to them, but everything that he did was for a reason. Lance was very much the same type of person. There was a reason that he suddenly got the Gym Leaders, the Frontier Brains and all their families out. "Tell Proton to look harder. He's missing something and I do not like being blindsided. Have the reports from Magma and Aqua come in yet?"

"You don't have to worry about Champion Wallace Reyes anytime soon, he has his hands full chasing after those idiots. From what I heard, he also has Steven Stone and as many of his Elites and Hoenn Pokémon Masters that he can get helping him. Champion Cynthia Jenness in Sinnoh has been putting all of her energy into dealing with Team Galactic's takeover after the assassination of their President. And Unova is a mess even with Team Plasma fighting itself."

"And Kalos?"

"They seem to be staying out of the problems in all political spheres, for now," Ariana told her boss. She pulled a touch-screen device out of her pocket and started flicking through the reports. "Also, we have yet to locate your son."

"He is of no huge importance. The boy knows no secrets." Giovanni paused momentarily. "Send Proton the word. Bring me Red's daughter."()

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"Okay," Gary said as he stretched out a map of Sinnoh in front of them, a notepad and paper at his side. "So we just have to figure out which Legendary Pokémon is guarding which orb and from there figure out where they're probably hiding out. Shouldn't be that hard."

Leaf, Misty and Ash all exchanged wary looks, but decided to humour Gary. They were waiting for May, Drew, Clemont and Serena to come back from Lavaridge Town to where they were waiting on the outskirts. Serena only had so much left for disguises and there wasn't nearly enough for all eight of them. A group of four wouldn't attract as much attention as a group of eight would anyway.

At first, the four of them just laid around, the thoughts of getting a little more sleep very appealing to most of them. Gary, on the other hand, wanted no part of sleeping. He wanted to do something useful, he wanted to plan. They had no idea where to go once they got to Sinnoh and he wanted to change that. Odds were that something would guide them in the right direction, but he didn't want to leave it to chance. Not only was it just a bad idea in general, but it was also really unsettling to think that their own choices might not matter much in the end.

He shook his head, not wanting those thoughts to weigh him down. "We have normal, ground, steel and rock. Not that many. That leaves fire, water, grass, ghost, psychic, dark, poison, fighting, flying, bug, dragon, electric and fairy." Listing it out like that made it seem almost impossible. It took them this long to get the ones that they had and things were getting worse by the day. Team Aqua and Magma's hold was getting more obvious the longer they stayed around populated areas. People were afraid of what the two teams would do with their legendary Pokémon, and for good reason. They weren't known to get along and no one wanted to get in the middle of that conflict.

"Fire, ice and lightning - sorry, electric - are on the three islands around Shamouti," Ash spoke up. He was still dozing in and out of consciousness, his head resting on Misty's legs.

"Fairy's probably in Kalos," Leaf added as she gently brushed her fingers through Pikachu's fur, the Pokémon sighing happily. "I can't think of anywhere else that has fairy-type legendaries. Outside of the closed off regions but those places won't do us any good. We'd never get in."

Gary jotted both Ash and Leaf's observations down and frowned. "Then there's the poison one. There aren't any legendary Pokémon with that typing that I know of."

Without warning, Leaf burst out laughing. Pikachu looked at her, completely startled. She twisted around to look at Ash and Misty. "I bet you all the money we have that the poison one's with Shaymin."

Gary watched with interest as Ash sat up, scowling fiercely. He had heard the story of what Shaymin did to Misty, but seeing his reaction and the way he shifted closer to Misty (if that was possible) was very interesting. Ash wasn't the type to get outwardly overly protective. Everyone knew Misty could take care of herself, but this was different.

"I'm not taking that bet, you're probably right because everything hates us that way." He thought about that for a moment. "Well, just me. Stupid Shaymin."

Misty nudged him. "Hey, you don't get to punt Shaymin off a cliff, okay?"

"Try and stop me." They both knew he actually wouldn't do something of the sort, but Ash wasn't going to admit anything like that.

Leaf grinned madly, and though Gary was frustrated that they were getting off topic, seeing her smile after being so miserable and sick for a while made him smile in turn.

He jotted down their idea of Shaymin having the Poison Treasure since it really did have some merit. That left Virizion with grass. Psychic was going to be hard to pin down though. As was flying. Dragon could be in any of the other regions as well.

It really was frustrating.

Ash perked up a bit and looked around. "They're coming back."

"Really? We just got planning." Gary sighed because of course that's how things worked out. They spent most of the time that they could have been doing something productive by instead having a nap.

"Gary says to go away, we're still planning," Misty called out when she saw May round the corner.

The brunette put a hand on her hip and raised an eyebrow. "Okay so you want us to go back and wait a bit?"

"He does." She pointed her thumb at Gary.

"So we found out that the trains are sporadic at best. There's one leaving for Slateport really soon, a big passenger train. Pros to that one is that we wouldn't be immediately visible to any cameras or anything in a crowd, but the con is that anyone could recognize us since we don't have enough to disguise everyone," Clemont explained, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

"We decided that it'd be better to get a later one. It's a passenger train that they're using as a cargo one for some reason, but that means there's gonna be a lot less people around," Serena finished explaining the plan to them.

"So what, we just wait until then and sneak on?" Leaf asked.

"We should probably get closer to the train yard while it's busier," Drew told them. "We'll stay out of sight but we need to be close to move fast. The train schedules are iffy at best."

"Do you know a way to get there where no one will notice us?" Gary directed his question towards Drew and May since they knew Hoenn better than the rest of them.

May shrugged her shoulders. "When I'm in Lavaridge I just use the main entrances. I'm not sure about anywhere else."

"I'm not entirely sure either," Drew agreed, "but it is at the outskirts of the city and there are a lot of mountains and hills around it. It shouldn't be that hard to hide." He hoped at least. They were going to have a hard enough time figuring out how to get onto one of the ships heading to Sinnoh (if any were even going), and they really didn't need any more trouble on the way there.

...

Max stared down at the book in front of him, trying to read and do his online homework (since apparently that system was still up and running just fine despite everything that was happening). It was hard though. He couldn't really focus on anything.

"Gro."

He looked up, meeting the worried eyes of his Grovyle. Max smiled a bit, reaching up and rubbing the Pokémon's head. "I'm okay. I promise. It's just..." The Pokémon tilted his head curiously as his trainer trailed off. "There was so much blood."

"Kir kirlia!" Max hadn't noticed a second Pokéball open while he was talking to Grovyle. His Kirlia came up to his side, putting his hands on his hips. "Li li kirlia lia kirl!" Though Max couldn't actually understand his Pokémon, he kind of got the gist of what he was saying. Kirlia was reminding him that it wasn't his fault, that he was the one who ended up saving Delia Ketchum because he didn't let her bleed out.

It was still really hard to think about though. Max didn't say it, but a part of him just wanted his mother or his father, even his sister would do. He just wanted someone from his family to be there with him. Mrs. Ketchum had been like a surrogate mother for the time being, and it was hard to see her in the hospital.

He set the book down and looked at the floor sadly. "I'm a trainer now, I shouldn't want my parents. I'm sure Ash never did."

Grovyle and Kirlia exchanged exasperated looks. There was really no way either of them could truly convey their thoughts that it didn't make him weak at all.

"No it doesn't." Max and his two Pokémon all jumped and looked up. Bonnie stood before them, Dedenne in hand. The blonde girl gave him a positively fierce look. "Wanting your parents when you feel bad is a good thing! Your family and friends are always there to help you! And I know Ash missed his mother and Misty a lot too."

"Well I—."

"I miss my brother too," Bonnie interrupted him. "So how about for now you can be my big brother and I'll be your little sister, okay? You can tell me things and I can tell you things. We can get Brock and Tracey to be our older brothers too!"

"It doesn't work like that," Max told her, reverting to his matter-of-fact voice.

Bonnie scoffed. "Course it does. Your family is who you want it to be. It can be your father or your brother or your friends or your Pokémon." She laughed as she swung Dedenne into the air, the Pokémon laughing along with her. "We can all be family now. You can borrow my dad too and Mrs. Paschall won't mind too!" She smiled at him brightly. "None of us are alone here."

Max slowly smiled a bit. "You're awfully smart for someone your age."

"You're not that much older than me," Bonnie deadpanned.

"Denne," Dedenne spoke up. "Den den dedenne ne de."

"Oh! That's right!" Bonnie was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet. "I forgot the reason I came to find you! Mrs. Ketchum woke up!"

That revelation startled Max. He dropped his book to his side and scrambled to his feet. "Really?"

"Yeah. I didn't see her yet, I said I'd come get you first!" She grabbed his wrist and started pulling him towards the door. "Come on!"

"Wait!" She didn't listen so he twisted a bit, calling his two Pokémon back into their Pokéballs. Despite the fact that she was smaller than him, Bonnie was surprisingly strong and fast, dragging

him the entire way to Mrs. Ketchum's waiting room.

The children both looked in the door curious, and Max felt relief well up in him when he saw Delia sitting up, cooing to Mimey and rubbing the top of his head. Bonnie walked into the room first, and Delia looked up at them, a smile rising on her face. "There are my two little heroes."

"Huh? But we didn't do anything. Mimey got that woman away," Bonnie said, tilting her head slightly.

Delia laughed a bit but winced. She reached out and Bonnie walked closer to her. She put her hand on the girl's cheek. "Ash always did that too. Tilting his head when he was confused. It's funny because his father used to do the same thing." Realizing that her statement had nothing to do with Bonnie's confusion, she shook her head. "You ran to get help and that made all the difference in the world. And Max—." Delia looked up at him, smiling broadly. "They told me that you kept pressure on my wounds and then thought to get Mimey to use his psychic abilities to stop me from bleeding too much. You're both such brave children, and you are heroes."

Max's cheeks burned as he slowly made his way over to the bed. "I'm just glad you're okay." It was genuinely nice to get some good news for once. Though he supposed that Bonnie's news of what she overheard the adults talking about was good news. "I'm glad Team Rocket didn't take you away too."

Delia's face suddenly went blank before shifting into one of horror. She tried to jerk up but grunted from the pain in her abdomen. She held her hand there and settled back down. "Bonnie, I need you to go find your father, Grace, Brock, Tracey, Amanda or Lance. Just one of them is good enough. Can you and Dedenne do that for me?"

"You bet! I'll be back in a minute!" Bonnie turned around and quickly ran out of the room.

"What's wrong?" Max asked the woman, concern clear in his voice.

"I just remembered...when I woke up they asked me what I could remember but it wasn't much but I...she took a brush with Ash's hair for some reason."

Max made a face at this statement, both from the confusion about why this seemed to panic Delia so much and the fact that Ash had a brush at all. "She took a brush, what's the big deal?"

Delia didn't answer, and that more than anything was unsettling to the young boy. He didn't understand why it was a big deal, but his happy mood instantly vanished.

He should have known that their win would be eclipsed by something bad.

...

"I can't believe they're using this entire train to transport cargo," Clemont noted as they made themselves comfortable. They were in the caboose of the train, sitting in between large crates wherever they could to stay out of sight. Luckily no one had come in to check on the back of the train. It was a little cramped, but that was fine for the eight of them.

"Pi pikachu pi pika." Pikachu said.

"Yeah, you're right. Cilan would have loved this," Ash noted from his spot between Misty and Gary. "He was always a big fan of trains."

"We need to find something to do to pass the time or I'm going to end up going insane," Leaf said

with a groan. "Anything."

"I can think of a few things we could do," Gary replied, wiggling his eyebrows.

Sitting on the opposite side of the train from him, Leaf shot Gary the single most unimpressed expression that Ash had ever seen her muster. "Or I could punch you in the face. That'd amuse me."

"So hostile."

"We could always plan how we're going to get off this train once it stops," May pointed out. "You know, since we didn't actually do that yet."

Everyone just stared at her blankly before Ash said, "We jump before we get there?"

"Of course we should jump," Gary replied sarcastically. "When you're in a vehicle you're going to the same speed as it, so it's not like we just fall down when we jump. We roll and either get hurt ourselves or die." He glanced behind him at the window. "And judging from these mountains it'd probably be the second. No way someone jumping would survive."

"I meant when it slowed down almost by the station." Ash shook his head.

"You could pad our fall with your Aura, right?" Leaf asked him.

He hesitated to say yes, because he hadn't really done anything with his Aura in the past day or so. He thought about it for a moment and slowly nodded his head. "Yeah. I think so."

"You think so?"

"Well it's different than falling down, right?" Ash wasn't very good at physics, even though he technically had to take that as an online course to graduate high school. He was proud of himself for recognizing that it was a physics problem at all.

"That'll be our last resort scenario then," Drew piped up sarcastically. "Just in case we—." His words were cut off by a loud bang and the entire train seemed to shake.

"What was that?" Serena asked, looking towards the ceiling.

Clemont frowned and shifted, turning his attention to the window. "That's a Skarmory."

The flying-type flew towards the train and tossed something at the window. The glass shattered and the device rolled across the ground. For a moment, they all just stared at it. Then the object snapped open, digging into the floor of the train and flickered to life with a strange sound and a flash of light.

"What the hell is that?" Misty asked, standing up. She moved forward to look at it, but Ash grabbed her arm and shook his head. It felt really weird to him, but not in the same way that the Mirage System did. Still, Pikachu's fur was standing on end and he didn't like this at all, so he reached for Greninja's Pokéball and tapped the button. Nothing happened.

Ash twisted around, tapping the button on his Pokéball again. When nothing happened, he moved to the next one. Panic welled up in him and he said, "I can't let any of my Pokémon out."

Almost immediately, everyone checked their own, finding the exact same problem. Clemont looked towards the machine with wide eyes. "It must be blocking them somehow!"

"But why—?" Serena's question was cut off by a flash of light that slammed into the end of the train, rocking it as the back wall was ripped right off. The wind rushed around them, and all of them could see the flying-type Pokémon that were attacking the train.

They all got up, moving towards the door that was still intact as a large Fearow swooped down. Pikachu's cheeks sparked and he unleashed a torrent of electricity, throwing the bird back and onto the tracks behind them.

"We need to get out of this car!" Misty called out as one of the boxes flew out of the back.

Drew turned around and managed to haul the door open. He hurried forward, stumbling over to the next car and pulling that door open. Clicking caught his attention and he looked down below, his eyes going wide as he saw the train cars start to separate. "They're letting that one go! Hurry!" He held out his hand, and May grabbed it. Drew hauled her across, and they both stumbled backwards. Gary came in next, Leaf not far behind him.

"Go!" Ash called out to Clemont and Serena. A Golbat flew towards them, but he threw out his arm, blasting it away with a wave of Aura. "Take Pikachu! I'll hold them off!"

"You first!" Clemont yelled to Serena. She looked over at where Gary was waiting, holding out his hand. She picked up Pikachu and took a deep breath, lurching forward and grabbing his hand as he helped her the rest of the way. Clemont nervously followed, nearly stumbling and falling, but Leaf managed to grab him.

"Hurry!" Ash backed up a little more, urging Misty to go. "I'll be right behind you, I promise!"

"You better!" Misty jumped to the next car, flying forward with a little more force than she expected. It felt like she was pushed, and as she collided with the floor, she realized that Ash must have used his Aura to push her. A moment later, he stumbled down onto the floor beside her.

They all watched as the other car detached and started to go in the other direction.

"There must be more than one of those devices," Clemont noted, panic in his voice as he tried once again to use his Pokéballs. "They're still not working."

It wasn't just the car that they were in that was being attacked, the entire train was. There were people up farther that apparently had their Pokémon out, fire and water lashing at the creatures attacking the train. Pikachu jumped up onto one of the chairs, shocking anything that came near them.

"We need to—." Whatever Gary was going to say was cut off as once again the wall exploded inwards. The shrapnel flew, and while most of them dodged, a piece still hit him.

Gary hit the floor, gasping for breath as pain rushed through him. He looked over, seeing a hunk of metal sticking out of his shoulder.

Leaf screamed when she saw Gary fall. Throwing caution to the wind, she launched herself over the seats she had been hiding behind, stumbling to his side just as he was about to try and pull the metal out. "Don't!" She took off her dirty gloves and put her hands on either side of it to stabilize it. "You need to keep it in, it could be holding the blood in." Despite the fact that she knew she was right, there was still enough blood to make her hands shake. "Oh Arceus." Panic welled up in her.

"Well, this sucks," Gary croaked out, ignoring the glass that exploded inwards. He grimaced. "Leaf, I think you should know—"

"No," Leaf snarled at him. "No, don't you dare start saying goodbye, you'll be fine." She twisted around. "Ash!" He could stop the bleeding and heal Gary, she knew he could. "Ash come here!"

That was easier said than done. Ash forced some of the Pokémon backwards using his Aura, but they were relentless in their attack. So many of them were hurt and despite the fact that they were the aggressive ones, Ash still felt bad for them.

He heard Leaf's scream and looked towards her. Ash felt his heart stop for a moment when he saw the blood and started running towards them.

May screamed as the explosion rocked the side of the speeding train. The metal wall ripped off with a shrieking crack and the door that was left by them flew open, unable to hold on to anything. Drew let out a strangled gasp and she cried out in alarm as they both slipped back.

Acting on pure instinct, May managed to grab the side of the train, keeping one foot inside the car and grabbing Drew's wrist with her other hand. It all happened in less than a second, and she doubted that she'd ever be able to be that quick and coordinated ever again.

Her sapphire eyes met Drew's bright green ones as she struggled to keep them both up. The wind whipped by them, tugging on both of their bodies, slowly pulling May from the car millimeter by millimeter.

Inside the car, Ash was thrown to the floor from the explosion. He looked up, blinking several times to get his vision in focus. The first thing he saw was his bag caught on a piece of shattered metal, dangling dangerously off of the end of the train. His heart stopped as he pictured the orbs within. At the speed they were going and with the way the orbs vanished after so long away from him, there was no way he'd get them back if they fell. They'd be back at square one.

He was about to run to the back of the train when May's scream caught his attention. She was holding on tightly, but she was dangling dangerously out of the train. His eyes turned back to the bag, and then to his friend again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone else run towards the coordinator, and took that opportunity to keep going after the orbs.

Drew watched in horror as May teetered dangerously on the edge of the train as he dangled uselessly. The exertion, the strain on her face, only told him how much effort and pain she was in to try and keep him up too. Her palm was sweaty, holding onto his wrist, her shell bracelet digging into his skin. "May..."

"It'll be okay!" She yelled to him, wind whipping her brown hair into her face. "I got you!"

She fully believed her words. Drew didn't. She was about to fall out herself when a blur of red and black launched out of nowhere. One of Serena's arms grabbed onto May's waist, her leg lifting up to go around the other girl's legs to try and keep her up. Serena tugged back with surprising strength, gritting her teeth and pulling as much as she could.

Ash skidded on the floor, desperately trying to grab his bag. It slipped, but luckily caught on one of the sharp edges that were sticking out. He laid on his stomach, inching forward to grab it, but realized his mistake when he started to slip forward.

There was a sudden weight on his back as Misty practically jumped on top of him to keep him from falling. "What are you doing? Are you insane?"

"I need to get it!" Ash yelled back.

Misty looked over his shoulder at the bag. She bit her lip, knowing that they couldn't let it fall.

"Hold onto me!" She shifted off of Ash's back and onto the floor beside him, inching forward. Ash closed his eyes and focused as hard as he could, projecting his own Aura forward as a sort of platform for her to lean on. The farther out she went, the weaker it got. He could only stretch his personal Aura so far and they were moving much too quickly for him to try and pull it from another source.

Misty gasped as she suddenly pitched forward. Ash grabbed her waist, hauling her back. At the same moment, a robotic hand went over their heads, grabbing onto the bag. It retracted back to Clemont, who tried to speak but was thrown to the ground by yet another attack.

Serena wasn't strong enough to pull them back in, and Drew knew that. She was just biding them time. An idea came to Drew, one that made fear bubble up in his chest, his heart beating wildly. It was terrifying, but he knew that it was right. It was the only thing that he could do.

"May! Let go!"

"Are you crazy?!" Her blue eyes went wide as she shrieked at him. "I'm not letting you go!"

"We'll all fall!"

"No! I'm not letting go!"

"You have to!"

"No!" Tears welled up in her eyes. "I can't! I can't! I'm not going to!"

Drew gritted his teeth, pushing down every last inch of fear he had and looked to the blonde girl. "Serena! Pull her back in and don't let go!"

"No!" May's grip on his wrist got stronger as he purposely let his slid. Her tears were flowing, falling down back onto the bracelet and onto him. "Don't you dare!"

He could feel himself slipping, and oddly enough, he wasn't afraid in that moment. Drew should have been, he was moments before, but he wasn't, not for himself. "Serena! Promise me!"

Tears were streaking down her own cheeks, but Serena still nodded her head gripping onto May as tightly as she could.

"No!"

"Stay with them! Beat Team Rocket and everyone else!" Drew took a deep breath, and the moment felt like it was going in slow motion. He could feel his hand slipping through her sweaty one, her bracelet coming with it. Drew noticed every single detail on May's horrified face as she screamed and pleaded with him.

"I'm sorry."

May screeched as Drew's hand slid through her own, and still holding onto her shell bracelet, he fell. At the same moment, Serena managed to jerk her back into the train, both of them spinning around and slamming into the floor.

"No!" May screamed and tried to get up, but Serena tackled her back to the ground. The two of them struggled. "No! Let go of me!"

The sudden realization that she had seen this before almost made Serena falter, but she got her wits

about her quickly. This was the exact same reaction Misty had to Ash falling into the crevice after the giant earthquake in Johto. The implications made the blonde absolutely sick.

She held her down as another loud explosion rang through the air, but this time it seemed to scare all of the attacking Pokémon away. Silence descended upon them. A moment later, two people were at their side. Serena looked up and saw Clemont trying to help her while Ash grabbed a hold of May, who tried to sprint towards the door again like Drew would be right there where she could drag him back in.

"Let me go!" May screamed at Ash, her voice absolutely hysterical as she struggled with him. He was bigger and much stronger than she was though, so she didn't stand a chance. "Let go! I can still save him! Let go of me!"

"May," he spoke lowly, his voice filled with sorrow. "There's nothing you can do."

"I can! I—!" She stopped abruptly and stared at him with wide eyes. Silence filled the ruined train car for a moment before she suddenly lashed out, slapping Ash across the face as hard as she could. "You could have saved him!" She slammed her fist downwards onto his chest, causing him to stumble back slightly, but Ash didn't let go. "You could have used your Aura!" Another hit. "You could have saved him!"

Misty moved forward to stop the assault on her boyfriend, but Ash looked at her quickly, shaking his head, and she stopped. He just stood there as May hit him again and again, not saying a word. Her punches got weaker and weaker.

"You could have saved him," May sobbed, very gently hitting him before falling forward. Ash wrapped his arms around the younger girl as she sobbed hysterically on his shoulder, holding onto the fabric of his shirt tightly. She tried to say something else, but it wouldn't come out, lost between her sobs. May's knees shook as she started to fall, and instead of just holding her up, Ash fell to his knees with her, and let her cry onto his shoulder.

Misty hesitated before taking a step forward, kneeling beside them and rubbing May's back as she cried. "Ash, you need to go help Gary. You need to—."

"No, no it's okay," Gary managed to croak out. "Leaf got me bandaged up enough for now."

The girl in question let out a shuddering breath, keeping one hand pressed against his injury as she closed her eyes. Gary looked up at her sadly, moving his good arm and putting his hand over her own, squeezing lightly. This time there wasn't any protest from her at all.

Serena's shoulders shook as she tried to hide her sobs, twisting around and resting her forehead on Clemont's shoulder. He tensed up with surprise, his arms slowly raising up to pat her back as he tried to blink his own tears away.

"Why?" May finally managed to get out, though only Ash and Misty could hear it. Misty just stared at the girl sadly, running a soothing hand through her hair, while Ash squeezed her tightly. No one said anything, but the question ran through his mind as he looked up, staring at his secure bag with the orbs that they had already collected safe inside.

She was right, he could have saved Drew, but he didn't.

...

May didn't want to be anywhere near Ash, eventually falling asleep from pure exhaustion between Serena and Clemont. Ash moved only to help try and heal Gary's wounds, but in general, he stayed

with his side pressed against Misty's, holding Pikachu close to him. Leaf stayed with Gary, but neither one of them said a word.

No one moved as the train started to slow. No one moved as it came to a complete stop and they heard footsteps outside. No one really knew what to do with themselves at all.

"Well, well, what do we have here?"

Slowly, Ash looked up, and if it was at all possible at this point, he felt his heart drop farther than it already had.

Standing outside of the train and staring at them were Archie and Maxie.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

I'm Still Here

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Ash's hand flexed a bit and Pikachu tensed up as they stared at the leaders of Team Aqua and Magma. They were trapped on a ruined train that somehow led straight to these two, and their Pokéballs were still nonfunctional.

"Calm down, Sparky," Archie spoke up. "We're not gonna hurt ya."

They exchanged wary expressions, prompting Maxie to say, "You have no reason to believe us, but we will not be handing you over to Team Rocket. We never expected it to be you who saved our most important cargo. We repay debts like that."

No one said or did anything until Ash stood up and took a couple cautious steps towards them over the broken glass and metal. "You're not going to tell Team Rocket we're here in any way? Why? You're working with them."

"Nah." Archie waved his hand. "No interest in working with those crazies."

Ash blinked several times, taking a step back. He tilted his head, narrowing his eyes at them, before looking over his shoulder. "They're telling the truth." His eyes turned to May and then Gary. "And we need to get them more help." No one could deny this. Whether they liked it or not, they were going to have to trust these two for now.

Misty stood up and walked to his side. She nudged Ash and said, "Go carry May." He nodded his head and turned back towards their unconscious friend while Misty turned her attention to the leaders of Team Aqua and Team Magma. "If you sell us out, I'll end you." She was being entirely truthful. Ash might not have been willing to cross certain lines, but at this point, as far as she was concerned, lines had already been crossed. They had no idea what happened with the train, though it seemed obvious to her that it belonged to Team Aqua and Magma now. It didn't really matter. Drew was gone, Gary was badly hurt, and May was emotionally ripped apart. She wasn't going to let anyone else hurt her friends.

She'd have Gyarados eat the problem before that happened again.

Maxie stared at her and Archie raised a hand in the air. "Feisty, aren't you? We're not going to sell you out."

"But you know who we are?"

"Your faces are plastered all over the news, sweetie," the man replied with a casual shrug. Misty could hear what was left of the cargo being removed from the train, meaning that they weren't alone.

"Even if that wasn't the case, we would still be aware of them," Maxie nodded his head towards Ash, who was carrying May. Leaf and Clemont were supporting Gary, Serena hovering close by just in case. "As it is, our boss made us aware that we might run into you. Team Rocket wants you, so that must mean you're valuable to our side."

"Your boss?" Leaf growled. "What boss?"

"Some of you may have met him in the past." Maxie tilted his head up slightly. "His name is Steven Stone."

...

May's eyes burned as she slowly woke up. Everything was stiff and sore, her arms were positively screaming with pain, and her throat was dry and was throbbing. She slowly pushed herself up and looked around with confusion, not understanding how she got inside of a room.

For a brief moment, the hope shot through her that what happened had been a horrible nightmare, but when her hand came up to brush aside her bangs, May saw that her bracelet was gone. Her stomach dropped and tears welled in her eyes when she remembered how she lost it.

The last thing she remembered was passing out on the train. Now she was alone in a room and it was very unsettling. Spying her bag on the ground beside her, she opened it, sighing with relief when she saw her Pokéballs all still there. She picked up the bag, swinging it onto her back as she swiftly moved towards the door. The second she was about to touch the door handle, it slid open, and she came face to face with someone she hadn't seen in a very long time.

May's bag hit the floor as she gaped with surprise. "Brendan?"

The brown-haired boy smiled sheepishly at her. "Hey May. Umm...you must be really confused right now, right?"

"Just...a bit?" Her dark blue eyes stared into his bright blue ones. "What's going on?"

"Sit down, I'll explain everything." He held out a cup of water that he was bringing for her when she woke up. May was a bit wary, but this was Brendan Birch, the only son of Professor Birch and one of her childhood friends. She was confused. She was distraught. Still, she supposed that she could listen to him.

May took a couple steps back, letting him in the room, and accepted the glass of water from him.

...

Gary groaned in pain as Ash pressed his hand against his wound. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to hide the way they watered up. Ash was trying something different, healing it basically from the inside out.

"It's just like pushing the pieces back together, that's why I can't heal burns or breaks or internal things most of the time," Ash explained when they started doing this earlier. "It's a big wound and it's gross but I can try to heal it from the side layer by layer. Might take a while though."

Take a while indeed. It never occurred to Gary that Ash could get worn out by something like this, but it did make him get tired quickly. They were almost done now, up to the top layer. It wasn't all that bad in Gary's mind. Not really. Leaf was letting him lean on her without any question, staying with him the entire time. That was certainly a bonus.

"That's interesting." Gary and Leaf both looked up in alarm as Maxie stood before them, watching with keen eyes. "I don't recall you being able to do that the last time we met."

"I couldn't then," Ash answered simply. He wasn't going to try and be shady and hide his Aura. Not when he needed it to help one of his friends. His pride, his secrets, they weren't worth that.

"No need to be hostile, little buddy," Archie called out from across the room. "I thought we covered that we weren't the enemies."

"That's true, but you never explained what you meant by you work for Steven Stone," Misty pointed out warily. "We were at Sootopolis and saw what happened there."

"That incident is exactly why we wanted no part of Team Rocket's schemes," Maxie said, tilting his head up in distaste. "Killing the legendary Pokémon and replacing them with fakes would never work, no matter how powerful they are. It was positively despicable. Killing Groudon and Kyogre was a cataclysmic mistake. We never wanted that, especially after seeing the power behind the legendary Pokémon years ago. The constantly shifting climate shows as much."

"But Team Aqua and Magma did join up with Team Rocket," Clemont told them.

"Half did. My buddy, Matt, and his grunt, Courtney," Archie nodded to Maxie while speaking, "thought they knew better than us. So we're trying to stop them from messing everything up."

"Recently, Champion Wallace appointed Steven Stone as a temporary head of the G-Men here. So we're working for him that way," Maxie informed them.

"You're G-Men?" Gary asked skeptically, wincing as Ash applied a little more pressure to his shoulder.

"Not really, we're just putting aside old differences and fighting a common enemy, ya know? No point in fighting each other too," Archie pointed out. "I mean, the G-Men and the Pokémon League are pretty shady too, but they're better than Team Rocket right now."

"Shady?" Ash leaned back away from Gary, satisfied that he had healed him as much as he possibly could. "How is the Pokémon League shady?"

Archie laughed boisterously. "If you guys only knew the secrets and shadiness behind the scenes. What they do to 'keep peace' and everything. How much sway they have over the actual governments when it's supposed to be the other way around. It's why it's so messed up now. "

"Giovanni took advantage of that," Maxie added. "Especially since he took advantage of Champion Lance's split priorities between Kanto and Johto."

"And it's not just on the bigger end of things. Like, we ain't no do-gooders or anything like that." Archie shrugged. "But at least we're upfront about what we are and not hiding in the shadows. Even their tournaments are rigged with League Sweepers."

"League Sweepers?" Leaf repeated. She had never come across the term in her life and instantly pictured some poor old janitor sweeping the league buildings from top to bottom.

"I'm not surprised that you haven't heard of them." Maxie pushed his glasses up his nose. "Though to illustrate our point that the Pokémon League isn't as good as most people think, I think we could explain it. League Sweepers are technically—."

"You're going to bore them to death," Archie deadpanned. "I'll tell them. League Sweepers are Pokémon Masters that enter tournaments."

"I thought Pokémon Masters were allowed to enter as many tournaments as they want?" Serena cast a glance over her shoulder at Clemont, who nodded his head. He was much more familiar with the politics behind the tournaments, being a Gym Leader. "Right, so why's that sketchy?"

"If that's all it was you'd be right. See the thing is, League Sweepers go in under the guise of being normal trainers. They're hired to go into tournaments and knock out the opponents that either the Champions or the Pokémon Master wants out. Sometimes it's to keep someone shady out, sometimes it's because they just don't want someone who might win to win. Ya know?"

"What? That's..." Serena didn't know what to make of that. Clemont looked equally flabbergasted.

"Who would do something like that though?" Ash asked, positively mortified by the thought.

"First one that comes to mind is the dude that uses Legendaries. Toby or something," Archie noted.

"Toby...Tobias?" Ash felt his heart sink a bit.

Archie snapped his fingers. "Yeah that's the one, you know him?"

"I faced him in the Sinnoh League. I—I took down two of his Pokémon even when no one else managed to take down his Darkrai but..."

Maxie shook his head and Archie laughed loudly. "Tell me, did you hear anything about him prior to your match? Any news or rumours? Or did he just seem to come out of nowhere?" Ash didn't say anything but his expression was enough to give the man an answer. "Well, it appears that you were probably his target to purposely knock out."

Ash gaped at that. He could distinctly remember how depressed he'd been after his loss in Sinnoh. He tried to keep a smile on his face but he felt so lost after coming so close. He ended up staying home longer and really had no plans to go anywhere else until Professor Oak took him and his mother to Unova. Ash looked back at Misty, who seemed equally as startled.

"Why would someone try to knock Ash of all people out of a tournament?" Clemont asked, clearly confused by the thought.

"It's hard to say. Though it would seem that someone somewhere just didn't want to give you a chance," Maxie noted.

It was kind of ridiculous, considering the situation they were in. Team Rocket was taking over the regions with the help from the other Teams (or half the Teams, in the case of Hoenn), using Mirage Pokémon to kill the real versions and try to take their places though they couldn't. They were sneaking around trying to find these orbs to somehow help Arceus stop all of this and it really felt like they were starting to run out of time. They were all wanted with bounties on their heads. Well, all of them except for Drew.

Ash choked up a bit as he thought of Drew. Drew, who had sacrificed himself so May and Serena wouldn't fall with him. Drew was gone and here Ash was feeling incredibly put-off and even a bit angry over the fact that the Pokémon League seemed to have purposely knocked him out of a tournament a couple years ago.

He shook his head wildly. No, he couldn't focus on that or on Drew. He needed to focus on their next move, and it certainly wasn't staying there. "We need to go to Sinnoh." He looked at Archie and Maxie. "You work with the Pokémon League. Get us there." Ash wasn't asking them for help, he was telling them.

"Sinnoh? Why would you want to go there? The safest region to go to is probably Kalos, though Johto is stable at the moment." Maxie eyed them. "Sinnoh is far worse off than here with Team Galactic running around."

"We need to get there," Ash stressed, jumping to his feet and taking a step towards him. "We...we can stop this but we need to go to Sinnoh."

"And how do you plan on stopping this?"

"Don't," Misty whispered suddenly. Don't tell them what they were doing just in case they changed their mind and decided to help Team Rocket later on.

"Doesn't matter, but we can stop this and we need to get to Sinnoh to do it," Leaf answered for him, helping Gary stand up. "So do you know any ways in or are we going to have to sneak out there too?"

"You lot seem good enough at that as is," Archie noted. "But...I guess we do owe you for helping to defend our cargo. And, you know, not letting us die a few years ago." He looked over at Maxie. "You know, we do need some more people to get on the inside."

"That is true, and we are running out of time," Maxie said after a moment of thought. He looked towards the teenagers. "It will be incredibly risky."

"We'll decide that," Gary assured them.

"Nothing is going in and out of Sinnoh aside from Team resources, and the biggest resource of all is getting sent over later tomorrow. New recruits. They're all being trained in Sinnoh, away from the madness in Kanto and here." Maxie nodded his head at his own words. "The only way to get there, is to infiltrate the enemy."

"Infiltrate them? How?" Clemont asked. "Like we said, we have a bounty on our heads."

Maxie ignored him and kept going. "We have a couple of our own recruits disguised as Rockets. We gave them new identities, new looks and sent them there already. But we could use some more. The mission is simple, infiltrate to put monitoring devices around their ship. Then lay low and get out at the first possible chance in Sinnoh."

"Wait," Misty asked, putting her hands on her hips. "You're saying you want us to-?"

"We want you to dress up like Team Rocket and go right into their training camps," Archie interrupted, sounding oddly excited about the prospect.

Ash, Misty, Gary, Leaf, Clemont and Serena all exchanged uncomfortable expressions, not quite sure what to make of this idea at all.

...

May stared up at the clear sky wondering why a lot of people wished it would rain to mirror their inner storm. She liked the warm air, clear sky and hot sand of Slateport City. It was like nothing bad ever happened there.

She sat at the edge of the empty beach, her feet resting in the cool, clear water. Brendan sat beside her, and she was still contemplating his words. Team Magma and Aqua being split up actually made a lot of sense to her since they seemed so unorganized when she saw reports about them on the television. She spied a Tentacool surface in the water not far from them, and it reminded her of Misty. Brendan said that Misty wanted her to know that Ash promised that Archie and Maxie were telling the truth. That they were on the same side.

May looked at the sand, guilt welling up within her. She knew that what happened to Drew wasn't Ash's fault. He was only one person and couldn't be everywhere at once. Yet he took her screams and her punches without any hesitation because she needed to get it out.

The silence was broken as Brendan chuckled slightly. May looked towards him, and he smiled sheepishly. "Sorry. It's just, you used to be afraid of them." He nodded to the Tentacool. "Actually, you used to be scared of all Pokémon. Now you're not."

"Gla?" On her other side, her Glaceon brushed her head against her leg. May smiled a bit, stroking the Pokémon's cool fur.

No, she wasn't afraid of Pokémon anymore. She loved them, and a whole lot of them were going to get hurt if Team Rocket got their way. Not to mention all the people. That was the problem.

May turned her eyes back to Brendan. "I don't know what to do anymore. We were trying to help the world, and now it's just...Drew's gone. Just like that. I never thought..." Tears fell down her cheeks and she shook her head. Glaceon cooed and sat up, gently licking the tears away.

"You don't have to do anything else you know," Brendan told her, bright blue eyes staring at her sympathetically. "You've already helped in your own way, right?" May had told him everything that she knew and had experienced so far, just getting it all off her chest to someone who hadn't experienced it. It was a fantastic and slightly unbelievable story, but at this point the boy had no idea why she'd make it up and chose to believe her.

May considered that, and it made her stomach twist. "No. No, I have to be doing something. Drew asked me to. He'd want me to keep fighting however I can." It wasn't Drew urging her to keep going. She couldn't just stand by while the world fell apart, not if she felt like she could help somehow.

"Well, you can stay here and help us," he suggested. "I mean, Lisia's a Coordinator too and she helps as much as she can."

Lisia Reyes, considered one of the best Coordinators in the world. She was something of an idol in May's eyes. Her Contest Performances were absolutely amazing, outshining anything her uncle, Wallace, could do. She was what May aspired to be. Lisia always seemed so sweet and bubbly that it was hard to picture the girl in this type of situation. Then she remembered seeing Wallace on the television while getting supplies, and how he mentioned his sister died in the attacks. That would have been Lisia's mother. The older teenager knew what May was feeling and kept pushing on.

That was exactly what she wanted to do.

May once again looked at Brendan, but stopped when she saw a bit of red on his face. For a brief moment a small smile flickered across her lips. "You have a crush on her."

He rubbed the back of his head. "Sure, she's amazing but she's older than me so it doesn't matter."

"So? You should tell her anyway!" May jumped to her feet, startling him. "You should tell her when you get the chance because it's always better than realizing what you feel when it's too late. Even if you just end up being friends, it's still better than not knowing or asking what if. It's better than running out of chances before you even realized you had one." May's hands clenched at her side as she closed her eyes.

"You really cared about him, didn't you?" Brendan asked about Drew.

"Yeah. I just didn't realize how much until then." May's watery eyes opened and she stared at her friend. "Thank you, Brendan, but I think I know what I want to do. Where are my friends?"

"They're with Lisia right now. She's helping them with something." He stood up as she walked by him, scrambling to catch up with her. "You know you are welcome here though, right? I know it might be hard to believe with those guys running around but Steven's here quite a bit too. You just missed him."

"I know." She grabbed his hand and squeezed encouragingly. "I know that I could stay here and help, and it would still be honouring him, but I can't do it. I need to be with my friends. It's where I belong."

Brendan smiled. "Alright. Let's go find them."

...

Ash had no idea who Lisia was when they were all introduced to her, and while it didn't seem to annoy her much, he was starting to wonder if it really had and she was just silently getting her revenge. He looked absolutely ridiculous.

"Well, I still know it's you but people will definitely overlook you," Misty teased him lightly. It was easy for her to be a little positive about it. Even with her rich, dark brown wig and dark blue contacts, she still looked amazing. He looked ridiculous with his eyes hidden behind contacts that turned them more of a hazel colour and a bright blond wig.

"These will work though," Lisia assured them as she continued helping Serena apply her wig. "You don't look enough like you to draw any attention and you'll have fake IDs."

"Okay, so they're going to register us into Team Rocket under these fake IDs," Gary said, looking up at the ceiling, his eyes a dark brown now. "Then we just walk up and blend in with the group. Get on the ship. Put the devices around as 'payment' for Maxie and Archie doing this. Pray we don't get caught, and try to bolt when we get to Sinnoh."

"Absolutely no way this could go wrong," Leaf noted. Her brow furrowed slightly. "How's your shoulder?"

"It's fine. A bit stiff but nothing bad," he assured her.

"That's a ridiculous plan." They all jumped and looked around as May walked into the room. "So is there room for one more in it?"

"You want to come with us?" Misty asked the younger girl. She was honestly surprised, expecting

May to want to stay here.

"I'm going to see this through, for him." May clenched her hand in a fist. "I'm going to make Team Rocket pay. They were the ones that attacked the train. Don't worry, I've still got a lot of fight left in me."

"Alright," Lisia said with a smile. "You know, Archie actually told me to expect another one. I guess he figured you out pretty quickly. You can sit down after I'm done with Serena." The girl was currently in the middle of being fitted with a thick pink wig.

"Right." May looked over to Brendan, nodding towards Lisia once. His cheeks turned red and he glared at her. May smiled slightly, but then frowned as she glanced at Ash. "Hey, um, Ash? Do you think I could talk to you for a minute? Alone?"

"Sure." Misty squeezed his hand reassuringly, which Ash reciprocated before walking out of the room with the younger girl.

Ash Ketchum wasn't a patient person, but he forced himself to act like one as May struggled to find the words she wanted to say. He opened his mouth to start first, but only ended up yelping lightly when she suddenly hugged him. He was stunned for a moment before hugging her back.

"I'm so sorry," May sobbed onto his shoulder. "I'm so, so, sorry Ash. It wasn't your fault. Not at all. I was so stupid. I was an idiot when I flipped out at you. I don't...I barely remember it."

"May..." he patted her back reassuringly, "it's okay. I can take it."

"No!" Ash was a bit startled by her sudden protest. "No it's not okay because you shouldn't have to take that from us, you shouldn't. We all wanted to be here. We made that choice. You didn't."

"Of course I—."

"Really? You're going to say that? It was the world ending or you going on this journey. Doesn't sound like much of a choice to me." He had nothing to say to that. "You're the last one who deserved that because it was not your fault. Okay? It wasn't. It was Team Rocket and bad luck and me and Drew and so many stupid bits and pieces put together. It's not your fault and I'm sorry. I shouldn't ask you to forgive me but—."

"I forgive you," Ash assured her. He knew that she was grieving and that she just needed to get it all out, and if he could help his friends by letting them unload on him, he'd do it. It was hard sometimes, more and more weight on his shoulders, but he'd rather suffer with all of that baggage than let his friends suffer.

It never quite occurred to him that it should be the other way around too.

They stayed that way for a little while until May pulled away from him and wiped her cheeks. "I guess I should go see if I can get myself all made up. I don't want to be me for the next little while, right?"

"That's one way of putting it." Ash led her back to the room, and May was almost immediately shoved into the chair that Serena had been in earlier.

"Everything okay?" Leaf asked quietly.

"No." The answer startled them all a bit. "Look at what's happened to us so far. I'm not stupid Leaf, even if we win and all come out of this, we're not going to be okay." Ash shook his head. "But,

we'll get through it and we'll get better. Right?"

"That's why we're all here," Misty assured Ash, resting her head on his shoulder. No, they weren't alright right now, but maybe if they stuck together they would be.

...

"Here's the deal. When you go in there, they're going to ask for the IDs that should have been given out to new recruits along with their uniforms and bags."

The fact that there were so many people joining Team Rocket was mind blowing to all seven of them. The ship that they were going on was a massive cruise-liner that Team Rocket had acquired at some point in time, and there were a ton of people waiting to get on. It wasn't just the sheer amount of people that were there that was startling though. They had all been worried about standing out because of their ages but everyone else told them not to worry and now they could see why. Though there were some shady people, almost everyone just seemed young.

"Your stuff is going to be hidden in another compartment, shrunk down even more than normal. All of your Pokémon will have to be kept in their Pokéballs and hidden in there. No grunts can bring their own."

Ash shifted his pack uncomfortably. He absolutely hated the fact that Pikachu had to go into his Pokéball several times now. That was the last thing he ever wanted his friend to have to do, but Pikachu was actually the one who insisted this time. There was just too much risk in giving them away. He hated it, but he took one for the team. Ash admired the Pokémon for that.

Beside him, Misty moved closer, her hand holding his tightly.

"You're not going to go as a big group. It would attract too much attention. Instead we took the liberty of making you new identities."

"You mean Shelley and Tabitha did."

"Well...yeah. Anyway, you two. Ash and Misty. You're Tom Baker and Anne Cross. You're a couple since it's pretty obvious you can pull it off. You joined Team Rocket because your family didn't want you to be together so you ran off and were looking for more meaning in life, something to do."

"That is lame and clichéd."

"Shhh, I like that story."

Tom and Anne. Ash admitted when the leaders of Team Aqua and Magma came to him and Gary about fake names, he just blurted out the first things he could think of. He wasn't going to admit to Misty that he suggested Tom Ato and Anne Chovie. In another situation it might have been amusing, especially with Brock there to be Caesar Salad, but those names were too obviously fake.

Still, Tom and Anne were simple names so they went with those. Their backstory was like a cross between some dramatic movie he was forced to sit through and their real backstory. Using truth was the key, according to Archie.

"Anyway, you two: Gary and Leaf. You're now Albert Vance and Fern Layton."

"Fern Lay...Gary!"

"I may or may not have mentioned the name in passing when they were struggling to find one."

"Ugh."

"Yeah, well you two were friends who just thought it'd be fun. That's legit a real reason."

Ash couldn't see Gary or Leaf anywhere, though he supposed they were heading towards the ship in a different spot. Misty breathed heavily as they finally got up to the check-in point in front of the boats.

"Name?" A gruff looking agent behind a desk asked.

"Uh—Tom!" Ash almost lost it for a second. "Tom Baker." The man checked the system, and Misty silently prayed that it would work. Relief rushed through both of them as he nodded his head and allowed Ash through the gate.

"Now Serena, you and May are Karla and Abby Myles. You're sisters. Clemont, you're Carlton Seward and you're Karla's boyfriend."

"Wha?"

Misty was quick to grab Ash's hand as she joined him and they made their way up onto the boat, following the crowds to a massive dining room. They grabbed a seat and waited, listening to the excited chatter around them.

"Learn your identities. Try not to use your real names unless you're being very quiet to one another. Put these devices in the positions on the maps we gave you. You should be able to get in and out fairly quickly without being detected. Then just lay low, blend in until you get to Sinnoh."

People were taking seats in a huge ballroom that was lined with chairs. Deciding to go with the flow, Ash and Misty grabbed a couple, sitting a little closer together than they normally would in a room full of people.

"Oh you guys are a couple too?" A girl across from them asked, unknowingly startling both of them. "My boyfriend and I came here together too. It's going to be so much fun."

"Fun?" Ash repeated.

"Well, yeah. I mean, training Pokémon in a group environment? Education? Traveling the world? And all we have to do is be spies? That's a win all around. Right Pookie!"

"That's right. It's going to be a lot of fun, Sugar Plum."

Ash made a face at them and looked at Misty. "We're never using horrible nicknames like that, okay?"

"I was about to tell you the same thing." She lowered her voice, leaning close to whisper to him. "What is she talking about though? That's not what Team Rocket does." It was unsettling to think about, because clearly the recruiters were lying and the media must have been hiding any of the wrong-doing that Team Rocket was actually involved in.

There was a screech of the microphone that startled them. A man got up on a stage and said, "Welcome one and all! We'll be setting sail shortly, and once we do that's when the fun begins! Talk to people! Spread out and do any of the activities around! These are your teammates for life, after all! There will be an announcement later for dinner and you all come back here. Then tonight we're having our big welcome bash!"

"For everyone or just people who are of age?" Someone from the crowd yelled out.

The man laughed. "This is Team Rocket, we don't have rules like that. Everyone is invited! We just have one night until we're in Sinnoh, this boat moves fast, so enjoy it because the training begins tomorrow. Welcome to Team Rocket!"

The cheers around them made Ash feel sick to his stomach. The only thing worse was the fact that he had to cheer along with them.

...

Ash only expected it to be some big, hard mission to get all of the monitors in place, but he and Misty were in and out of their locations in record time. Now they were just walking throughout the ship, not quite knowing what to do with themselves.

"Hey!" Both jumped and turned around. Ash's heart was beating wildly as a tall man, clearly a senior-level Rocket, walked towards them. He stopped in front of them and eyed them both. "You lost?"

"Uh..."

"No, I know what you're up to." The man rolled his eyes. "The rooms that trainers can stay in are up, not down. Yes, they all lock. Yes, no one can hear you. Yes, they all have condoms. Do whatever or go back to the party in the main ballroom."

Both of their faces turned beet red and they silently agreed to go up into the most crowded space they could find to avoid a situation like this again. It didn't take long to find the party that the man mentioned. The ballroom had been switched around from earlier. Instead there were lights and dancing in one area, music blasting throughout it. There were tables with people playing different card games, what looked like bars and many other things. It was quite the sight to take in.

Ash wondered why Team Rocket was bothering with this. It didn't add up.

"Having fun?" Ash looked around as Leaf came over to them.

"What are we supposed to be doing?" Misty asked her, eyes darting around nervously.

"Once we did the thing?" she wasn't going to talk about it out loud. "We blend in. Who knows, we might be able to pick up some info while we're here."

"Where's Gary—sorry...Albert?"

Leaf snorted at the name. "He and I are going to play poker with some people. You guys wanna join?"

Misty's eyes lit up at the challenge but Ash just pouted. His girlfriend laughed and nudged him. "Don't be like that just because you suck at it. You have a terrible poker face. It's amazing you managed to keep your secret for as long as you did from most people."

Ash tried to find a way to reply to that but just shrugged his shoulders. "You go play if you want. Just don't get caught cheating. I'll...find something else to do." He really didn't want to go over there. It wasn't just his obvious emotions that made him bad at poker, it was the fact that he couldn't quite learn the rules no matter how hard he tried.

"No, I'll stay with you." Though the words seemed normal, Misty said them so quickly and latched

onto Ash's arm so tightly that it made him raise his eyebrow. Leaf looked just as confused. She shook her head and walked back towards where Gary was sitting at a table.

"Let's just go sit down, get a drink and relax for a few minutes," Misty suggested, dragging him over towards the makeshift bar that was there.

Misty didn't like her sisters' parties. They were always so hot, loud and full of obnoxious people, though they claimed that it was a normal part of life for people who didn't trudge around the world and waste their teenage years away. She took offense to that. So it was very strange that she was so comfortable at the moment. She was dressed in the uniform of the enemy, surrounded by so many new Grunts, but they suddenly didn't seem like monsters. These people around them were older teenagers and young adults, just laughing and having a good time. Some were intoxicated, some were high, some were dancing, some were just sitting and having fun. There were just kids there too, or people that didn't want to be in such a crowded area. It was so weird, that being surrounded by the enemy made her really feel like a normal teenager for the first time.

She wasn't drinking anything though, none of them were since there was too much of a risk of someone revealing their real identities.

Misty once again cast her eyes towards where Leaf and Gary were playing poker, something Gary appeared to be very good at. She surprised herself by talking to anyone that came by where she was sitting with her boyfriend. Though she wasn't doing anything really, it was still enjoyable.

If this was the type of life they led, where these parties were common things, Misty could just picture Ash flitting around from group to group trying to talk to everyone, being generally loud and obnoxious but also friendly and well-meaning. Instead, he was just sitting beside her, drinking from a glass of water every once in a while. He was tense, his eyes darting everywhere. It was obvious that, unlike her, he wasn't having any fun at all to the point where it was standing out.

She suddenly felt sick. It wasn't a physical ailment, but rather something that just occurred to her that should have hit her a while ago.

Misty ran her hand up his back, startling him a little bit. Ash glanced over at her as she nuzzled her nose into his shirt. "Do you want to go somewhere else?"

"Hmm?"

"You don't seem like you're having much fun. So we can go somewhere quieter. Remember, that guy was pretty blunt about there being rooms for...uh...couples? No one will think twice or bother us. Then we can just have some quiet time."

"You're having fun though," Ash pointed out, sounding almost like he was accusing her. Realizing this, an apologetic expression passed over his face. "Sorry, I just..."

Misty put her finger to his lips and shook her head. "Well I'm not going to be happy if you're not happy." She stood up and held out her gloved hand to him. "Come on. We can get away from all of...this." She was about to say all of their enemies, but that's not what these people were. Not yet. These people were lost and had no idea what they were getting into. The idea instantly made any happiness that she had fade away, replaced by an uncomfortable sick feeling. They had no idea and wouldn't until it was too late.

Ash must have felt her change in mood, because he took her hand and stood up. They silently left the room after nodding to Leaf to signify that they were leaving.

They walked in silence, passing other couples and no doubt many one-night stands. Neither paid attention to any of them though. Ash looked anxious, and Misty knew that he wanted to say something but was keeping it to himself for now.

Finally, they found a place where they could talk in private. Ash looked around the room as she locked the door, focusing as best as he could. Though Aura and electricity were two different things, sometimes he could find electrical devices. If there was a bug or a camera in the room, he couldn't feel it. At ease for a moment, he turned to Misty. "What's wrong?"

That broke her a bit because it was just like Ash. Always putting others before himself. She shook her head and said, "I've been a horrible girlfriend." She sat on the bed and then patted the spot at her side.

"What?" He looked completely flabbergasted at that. He sat beside her and put his hand on her shoulder. "No you're not. You're the best one I've ever had!" He thought about that for a moment and realized his mistake. "Uh...well you're the only one I've ever had, but whatever. Still, you're not."

"You're about to explode. I can tell. You're all serious and distant and that's not like you at all. We both know that. After May, you were the closest to Drew, and you still took all May's anger even when you didn't deserve it. You always do and that...that's not fair of us. At all. So I just...I want you to get it all out. It's just me, right? I want you to talk about anything on your mind." She ran her fingers along his cheek. "I've known you since you were a reckless little goof who had no idea what he was doing. You don't need to be strong for me."

Ash watched her with weary eyes and shrugged his shoulders, glancing away from her after a moment. "What's to say? Drew's dead. I mean, it's not like he would have been here if he hadn't run into us. It's not like I could have saved him or anything, right?" Misty's brow furrowed and she opened her mouth, but he cut off anything she was going to say. "It's not like every time something bad like this happens people turn around and get angry at me. I'm the one with all these powers, right? If something goes wrong it is my fault. I should be able to stop it from happening."

Misty just stared at him, not quite sure what to say. She also got the feeling that he wasn't done. He was staring at the floor, his hands starting to shake. Without warning, Ash leapt to his feet and started pacing. "I'm supposed to be able to fix everything but I keep screwing up and every time I make a choice someone gets hurt and I—I just—you all have the choice to be here. You all chose to come. I didn't." His voice lowered to almost a whisper as he said that, but then a moment later, he became loud and angry. "I don't even want to be here but I have to be and I'm trying my hardest so why does it always have to be my fault? I'm just one person how am I supposed to save everyone?" He shook his head.

She had seen her boyfriend frustrated many times, but it had been a while since she saw him so frustrated that he was almost near tears. Misty's heart sank a bit as she realized that this must have been what he was keeping inside, or at least a bit of it.

"Drew's dead," Ash blurted out. "Drew's dead and Gary almost died and I'm trying so hard." His eyes met hers briefly before he looked away. "We're all here, but...but when everyone is so quick to jump at me it feels like...like I'm still alone in this." He paused. "But I shouldn't complain. Sorry."

That was enough for her. Misty grabbed his hand and dragged him down so that he was sitting again. He refused to meet her eyes, so she shifted her weight, swinging around so that she was straddling him. She put her hands on his cheeks to force him to look at her. "You listen to me, Ash Ketchum. You are never alone in this. You understand me? Drew dying isn't your fault. It's exactly

like you said. There were a ton of different things happening. It's not your fault. And—and yes, you should complain. You should get it all out because sometimes it's easy to lean on you. It's easy to forget that you don't have a choice to be here or not." Her hands slid down to his shoulders, and Misty was pleased when he kept looking at her. "We need to stop. You're the type to take other people's burdens without a complaint, and that's not fair, not now."

Misty looked at the floor. "I—you're the only reason I'm on this crazy adventure. That's why I'm here, to help you get through this and I've failed miserably." She shook her head. "So I want you to get things off your chest, okay? I want you to tell me. If I can do anything at all here, it's to make sure that you don't break yourself while trying to fix the world." Oddly enough, she was really okay with this self-assessment. Misty didn't need to save the world herself, just one person was enough for her, especially when that person meant more to her than anything else. "You're right, you didn't ask to be here and in the end saving the world is your job, so we need to step up ours to help you. That's why we're here and we've all been pretty shitty at it."

They just stared at one another after that, neither one really knowing what to say after they both had their chance to monologue. Slowly, Ash reached up and put his hand on her cheek. "You're crying."

So she was. Instead of hiding it like she normally would, she just reached up and tugged at his wig.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't want Tom to be here. I just want Ash here. Nobody's going to come in. We're safe here."

They both knew that might not have been true, but they were already caught in that case.

"Yeah but...why? I'm still me."

"I just keep thinking...what if I hadn't been able to hold onto you while you grabbed the bag? What if I let you slip?" She blinked her eyes rapidly, her voice choking up a bit. "Drew's gone. May didn't even realize how she felt about him and now it's too late and he's gone." She looked at the floor. "My parents have been gone for a long time. My grandmother too. Now my sisters are gone. Most of my Pokémon are gone. I only have six of them left." Her eyes looked up at his. "And you. I always thought I'd be okay alone, that I could be independent and not need another person. That no one could define me but me. But..."

"But you are," Ash seemed completely confused by that. "You're you." He reached up and tugged her wig off of her. "I guess...I guess we both need to learn that being strong doesn't mean you can't lean on someone else, right?" He looked at her so endearingly and honestly that it made her heart flutter a bit. She hadn't seen that look in a while. That was one of the reasons that she kissed him. It startled Ash, but he got over that quickly enough.

Misty pulled him closer, a bit of fear and urgency rising up in her chest. It was selfish, but the reality was, they could die at any moment so wanting to protect one another a little more was only natural. Ash had a big heart and would no doubt do anything he could to protect everyone, but knowing that he was willing to lean on her made Misty feel warm and happy.

She pulled away from him slightly. "Even if it's just me, I'll protect you and you can protect me and we'll protect everyone else along the way. Then we'll save the world." There was a fierceness to her voice and flames in her eyes. "We're going to win. We're going to win because we can't lose. He's backing us into a corner. He doesn't know the enemies he's creating. We're going to win." Ash just stared at her in awe. Misty felt her cheeks heat up at his gaze and asked, "What?"

Ash tried to explain what was going through his mind but found that he couldn't. Sweet words

weren't something that came naturally to him. Instead, he tugged her as close as he physically could, pressing his lips to hers. She sighed against him, tilting her head as her fingers ran through his hair, his fingers drawing random shapes and patterns on her back. Misty pushed him backwards, never once breaking their kiss.

...

"It's strange, isn't it?" Clemont asked Serena as they watched a couple of girls walk by, laughing and clearly having a great time together. "So many people here just seem so..."

"Normal?" Serena suggested. "Mrs. Ketchum once said that Team Rocket preys on young people who are lost." Her shoulders slumped a bit. "But there are so many...they don't know what they're getting into." She didn't quite know how all of these people could ignore what was happening, but assumed it had something to do with how the media was presenting Team Rocket.

"I want to hate them," May spoke up from the opposite side of Serena. The two blonds exchanged worried looks, but she ignored them. "I want to hate every single one of them since Maxie said it was some Rocket Grunts that attacked the train. But I can't." She shook her head. "These guys are just kids." Many of the people were actually older than her, but May felt older than the rest of them.

They all felt older than they really were.

"You're a good person, May," Clemont said to her, wincing a bit when he realized that he used her real name. "There's nothing wrong with seeing the good in people."

"Besides," Serena looked out at the people around them, "we don't need more motivation, but that's what they are. We can still save these people if we really work together and get through this." They all got the feeling that the happiness and lightheartedness that they were experiencing would end soon. It was inevitable.

May thought about that for a moment before nodding. She got up and said, "I'm going to get some air."

"Want one of us to come with you?" Clemont asked.

"No." She smiled weakly at them. "I'll come back in a few minutes. Promise."

The two Kalos natives watched her walk away. Serena smiled slightly. "She's so strong, isn't she? I don't think I could be."

"Don't sell yourself short, you got through heartbreak pretty amazingly too." His face turned red. "I mean...uh..."

"You're right, I did." Ever since she actually got the chance to talk to Ash, it was easy for Serena to say. "This is different though. I think she can get through it though. I really do. We'll help her every step of the way."

Clemont just smiled at her certainty. Yes, they'd definitely all work together. They were a team after all.

...

Leaf had to drag Gary away from the poker table before they drew too much attention to themselves by him constantly beating everyone. At first, she tried to find Ash and Misty, but

couldn't locate them anywhere.

She leaned against the railing of the ship, staring out over the calm ocean. It was strange how the weather was so erratic in Hoenn, yet here it seemed to be fine. Everything was fine out here and it was really unsettling.

Leaf glanced over at Gary, who was standing beside her, and caught him wincing. She frowned and reached forward, putting her hand on the shoulder that had been injured. "You okay?"

"Yeah, it's just a little stiff and sore, nothing I can't deal with," he assured her, though for once his voice didn't sound too cocky or overly self-assured.

"You would have died," she blurted out, feeling a bit of the panic that she experienced on the train coming back. "We already lost Drew, and if Ash couldn't heal, you would be dead."

"No I wouldn't."

"You would. You're not immortal, no matter what you think."

Gary shook his head, running his hand through the fake hair of his wig. "It's not that. It's more...mind over matter. You know?"

"You were going to mind over matter shrapnel in your body?" Leaf stared at him with a raised eyebrow. "Yeah, I would have liked to see that. Why would you bother?"

Gary looked down at the ocean. "I've been thinking a bit...and...look. Leaf, I know I tease you a lot, and I'm rude and a jerk and a flirt a lot...but...you asked me once why I was here. Remember? Way back in Johto."

"Yeah, I remember. What does that have—."

"A part of this is for Ash, he's my friend, but a bigger part of me knew you were coming and no one could tell you otherwise. That's why I came." Leaf just stared at him, not sure what to make of that. She wasn't even sure if he was being completely honest. "That's how I would have mind-over-mattered metal in me, because I'm not going to be like every other person you talked about back in the caves. I'm not going to leave. Not willingly."

Leaf stared at him. Gary waited for her response, honestly not sure how she'd take it. He had to get it out. Seeing someone younger than him die just like that, knowing he could have died just as easily, was a very good motivator. She studied him for a moment, and he waited for some defensive or sarcastic comment.

Instead of either of those, Leaf kissed him.

...

May breathed a sigh of relief when she got away from all the noise. It was really overwhelming to keep a happy facade when she was anything but.

The young teenager leaned against the railing, closing her eyes for a moment before looking out over the ocean again. Their ship sent waves throughout the water, but outside of that, the ocean was oddly calm almost to the point where she could see the stars reflecting in it.

It would have been nice to see this with Drew.

Her chest constricted and tears welled up in her eyes again. May closed her eyes, clasping her hands together in front of her. "Please...please..." Her eyes opened and she stared at the stars. "I know you're asleep, but please Jirachi. I—wherever Drew is now...please help him. Please let him be okay. I just...wherever he is, let him be safe. Please." She stared up at the sky, not bothering to wipe away her tears.

She hoped that the twinkling of the stars was Jirachi answering her.

...

Max was startled out of his sleep. The young boy looked around the room he was currently sleeping in, sharing with a couple other boys his age. He ignored them, shifting to his knees and looking out the window that was right beside his bed. The sky was blissfully clear, not like the past few days when it was constantly rainy.

He stared up at the stars, not quite wondering why he suddenly felt so sad. Something inside of him whispered that there was something wrong with May, but that didn't make sense.

Max couldn't really explain what he did next for the life of him. He clasped his hands in front of him and thought of his old friend. "Jirachi. I think May's in trouble. I don't know why, but please, help her however you can. Please." He looked up at the sky with unshed tears. "Help my sister."

...

Caroline's eyes fluttered as she felt something tap her face. At first, she thought it was one of the Pokémon that she and Norman had with them, but when she looked up, she realized that it wasn't. Instead, it was a very distinct Pokémon with a golden, star-shaped head.

She jerked up, startling Norman awake as the Pokémon retreated from their tent. Though she wasn't exactly one for camping, it was much better than ending up in the clutches of Team Aqua and Magma. In fact, it had been rather peaceful, at least until that moment.

"Caroline?" Norman asked. "What's wrong?"

She didn't answer. Somehow, the woman knew that the legendary Pokémon wasn't a threat despite what was happening everywhere else. Caroline stood up and made her way out of the tent, her husband following her.

Jirachi was waiting. The Pokémon smiled before turning and flying away, stopping to look back at them. It wanted them to follow.

"Wait—!" Caroline ignored what her husband yelled, her heart beating painfully against her chest. This was the Pokémon that meant so much to Max. She just knew that it must mean something. So she followed Jirachi down towards the beach. The Pokémon was hovering over something, looking rather sad. It looked up as they approached and smiled again before disappearing.

That's when Caroline saw what it was. She gasped and ran, skidding to her knees beside the form. "Drew!" The boy was covered in cuts and bruises, his clothes soaked with blood and water. "Norman! We need to get him help!"

"May." Caroline jumped at the weak voice. Her head snapped down again and she stared at the green-haired boy as he struggled to keep his eyes open. "May's okay."

Relief rushed through her at the answer to her unspoken question. "Don't worry, sweetie. We'll get you help, can you tell me what happened?"

"I died." His eyes started to flutter again.

Thinking that he meant he felt like he was going to die, Caroline turned to yell for her husband to hurry up. They could use the Pokémon to get him to a hospital. It didn't matter if they were caught by any of the Teams. "Don't worry, you'll be okay."

In the water, a small, blue creature surfaced, holding a bracelet made of teal seashells. The Pokémon nuzzled the necklace and smiled at the scene on the shore, knowing that the boy was going to get help.

It took both her and Jirachi, but they managed to grant more than one wish that night. The Pokémon felt quite pleased with himself as he turned around and splashed back into the water.

"Love you, mama. Love you, May."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

A Leap of Faith

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The leaves crunched under his feet, his breath burning in his lungs as he ran through the thick forest. He dodged low-hanging branches and jumped over raised roots. Normally not the type to run from any sort of fight, he had absolutely no choice. If he stopped to face the enemy as he was, he wouldn't stand a chance, and he'd really rather live to fight another day. Dusty-purple hair fell into his eyes, and he made a mental note to hack his long hair off as soon as possible. Once upon a time, stopping to bother with something like a haircut was just too troublesome, but now it was nothing but a hindrance.

A loud bang exploded through the air, and his ears rang painfully. His entire body jerked, and he stumbled, tripping over one of the raised roots that he had been trying to avoid. His body hit the ground, but oddly enough, he didn't feel any type of sting. Normally he just ignored it, this time he didn't feel a thing.

Paul breathed in an out, his face against the dirt and dead leaves that were prematurely falling from the trees. His hand curled into a fist, tugging some of the dry grass from the ground as he opened his eyes just a bit. There was a shadow looming over him.

Foul breath hit him and Paul forced himself to look up at the drooling maw of a large Houndoom. In Paul's mind he didn't fear much, especially not Pokémon, but he couldn't deny the raw feeling of something bad rushing through him as he shifted a bit.

That was when the pain hit him and he groaned, finally moving his hand down to his side where he felt something wet. Had they hit the last bottle of water that he had?

There was a bit of laughter and mocking from somewhere above him, but Paul wasn't really focused on that. Instead, his attention went back to the Houndoom as he snarled at him and lunged forward.

A flash of light blinded him momentarily. Already heavily injured, Torterra practically threw himself at the Houndoom, who clearly wasn't expecting any type of fight. The fire-type was thrown backwards, slamming into a tree as Torterra lumbered towards him. Normally, he wasn't the fastest Pokémon around, but that was even more pronounced due to his injuries and Houndoom's speed. The enemy Pokémon got up quickly and jumped at the grass-type.

Paul shakily reached out, almost like he was hoping to stop his Pokémon with his bare hands. His steel-grey eyes turned away from Torterra for just a moment, locking onto the red substance on his skin. His muddled mind hated it, thinking this liquid was what impeded him.

There was cruel laughter as Houndoom jumped onto Torterra, baring its sharp teeth. This time, Paul tried to find his Pokéball, but didn't really have the coordination. All he could do was watch.

A torrent of water slammed into Houndoom, throwing it off of Torterra. A wave of electricity followed, and the dark-type howled in pain. The ground shook under Paul and something big ran behind him. He could hear the screams of surprise and the shouts of his pursuers. It sounded like they were scared and in pain. Good.

A sparkling cloud of powder flew overhead, and even though he was starting to feel really tired, Paul still recognized it as a Stun Spore. That was good too. Whoever was doing this was smart.

That's when it hit him that, in the middle of the woods in the middle of nowhere, someone was in the middle of saving him. The odds of that were astronomical. He should have been left there to die.

Suddenly, there were pink boots in his field of vision. Someone was looming over him again as a small hand reached out and touched him. He could see a bracelet made of pale purple beads.

"Paul? Paul! Talk to me!"

That was his name. How did she know his name? Slowly, Paul looked up. His vision was blurred, but he still found himself looking into a wide pair of dark blue eyes, dark blue hair framing his savior's face as she stared at him in horror.

He knew this person, but he couldn't say anything. Instead, his world went dark.

...

The next time Paul awoke, he was much more aware of a radiating pain on his side. Not only that, but he was laying down on something that was moving. He groaned and blinked, trying to get his vision back in focus.

"Don't move too much," a feminine voice spoke up. "I could only help your side a little bit. It's still pretty bad."

Paul looked down, realizing that he was on the back of a large Mamoswine. He moved a little more, blinking down at a familiar teenage girl.

"Dane?"

Her face turned red, dark blue eyes snapping up to him as she walked alongside the Mamoswine, carrying her Piplup in her arms. "Seriously? You forgot my name? It's Dawn!" She spoke with such a ferocity that Paul could practically see the steam rising off of her. "Nice thanks I get for saving you."

"Saving...that was you?"

"No, it was the other trainer who just happened to be in the woods around Celestic Town." She paused for a moment. "Never mind, that could actually be quite a few people, but yes, it was me. Why were they—?"

"Torterra! Where is—?" He burst out, moving a little too much and grimacing as pain rushed up his side, unable to finish his sentence.

"Stop moving before you mess up the bandages!" Dawn snapped before her expression softened. She reached for the bag that was slung over her shoulder, resting at her hip. Digging for a moment, she pulled out six Pokéballs. "They're all yours. I used some of my potions on them to help a little, but we'll take them to Nurse Joy."

"No." Despite the fact that he was in pain, his voice came out surprisingly strong. "You can't trust anyone here. You probably don't get it but—."

"Hey, I do too get what's happened!" Dawn fumed. "We can trust this Nurse Joy. I'm positive." She paused for a moment. "Why was Team Galactic after you?"

Paul eyed her warily, but realized that his suspicions were actually a bit ridiculous. Though it had been a few years since he had seen her face-to-face, he did happen to see her on televised contests and things like that when he was flipping through the television. He knew that Dawn wasn't the type to join up with lunatics like Team Galactic or Team Rocket.

"They – Team Rocket – whoever – they tried to recruit me," Paul admitted after a moment of silence. "I said no."

"You actually said no to them?" The surprise on her face was obvious. "How?" Her question was vague but he understood what she meant. How did he get away? How was he still alive? No one was taking no for an answer, especially after the President was assassinated and it turned out that the Vice President and a lot of the others were pro-Team Rocket. It was part of the reason that Paul was so wary.

"I ran, okay?"

"Well, yeah but—."

"Leave it alone," he snapped fiercely, and Mamoswine snorted.

"It's okay, Mamoswine." Dawn pet the large Pokémon's thick fur coat. She looked back up at Paul. "You should try to get to sleep. You'll be okay. No need to worry."

He had every reason to worry, but Paul found himself nodding off anyway.

...

Dawn peered inside of the makeshift hospital room in the small Pokémon Center. Her eyes focused on the monitors around Paul, tracking his vitals. They were all strong, and Nurse Joy insisted that he'd be okay along with his Pokémon, but it was still unsettling for the young teenager. There was so much blood when she was bandaging him.

He was okay though, and so was his Pokémon. That was good because they really didn't need to lose anyone else in all this madness.

Dawn made her way through the Pokémon Center, picking up Piplup on the way out.

The air was muggy and warm that day, a stark contrast from the freezing temperatures that hit every other day or so. Fog loomed around Celestic Town, but that was fairly normal. With fog, treacherous bridges and mountains, the town was very hard to get to unless you already knew about the hidden roads that ran through the mountains. Few did. That was part of the reason that when the government fell, Cynthia chose to house their little rebellion there. It was safe, easy to defend, and everyone without exception could be trusted.

At least until now, and that was something Dawn was determined to change. She made her way towards a large house, not bothering to knock. This house acted as their main headquarters beyond anything else. It belonged to Cynthia's grandparents.

The blonde woman in question was leaning over a desk in the corner, frowning as she wrote something down, punching numbers into a calculator beside her. Dawn admired Cynthia quite a bit and had come to know her much better than she ever expected that she would. She didn't like seeing the worry and stress lines appearing on the young woman's face as the days passed by with Team Galactic and Team Rocket basically running Sinnoh now.

Dawn glanced at the papers curiously, frowning a bit when she saw 'budgets' and some very discouraging numbers. She cleared her throat and Cynthia jumped, looking up at her warily. The woman sighed, shoulders relaxing a bit. "Can I help you with something, Dawn?"

"I was just wondering if I could talk to you about Paul?" She set Piplup on the ground and smiled brightly.

"Actually..." Cynthia glanced down at the papers and then shook her head. "Alright, what about Paul Wayland?"

"Well, I was just wondering...do we have to keep him handcuffed to that hospital bed?" Though hidden by the blankets, Dawn knew that they were there.

"No," Cynthia's voice was stern and left no room for arguments. "You told us yourself that Paul admitted to Team Rocket trying to recruit him. Until we know for sure that they didn't, we're going to be wary."

"But they were shooting at him! And they'd have no way of knowing if there'd be someone there or not!"

"Unless they know where we are." That shut Dawn up immediately. She didn't want them to find their safe haven even if it should have been an obvious place to look. "Until he gives someone actual answers on how he got away and why they were really after him, I'd rather be safe than sorry." Her expression softened. "He's a friend of yours, right?"

"Uh...well...I know him." A friend? That wasn't the exact description Dawn would use for Paul. A potential friend would be the best case scenario. "I know he's not on their side though. I know we can trust him."

"I guess we'll have to wait and see." The blonde looked up at her. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No. Thank you for your time." Dawn quickly scooped Piplup back up and hurried out of the room.

Once she was a little away from there, a fierce scowl appeared on her face. Dawn pouted and made her way up to one of the cliff sides, where she sat with her legs dangling over the edge.

"This is ridiculous," she finally said to Piplup. "I mean, Paul might be a jerk but he's not a bad guy, right?"

"Pip piplup," the Pokémon replied with an unhelpful shrug.

"I guess I can understand why everyone's afraid though. They were really close to here." She looked down at the full cabins and makeshift tents. Nearly everyone there had parts of their families torn away from them. Worry welled up within her as she let herself think about her mother. When the takeover started, she had been in Snowpoint City and managed to get away with Zoey, but there was no word on Johanna. Dawn clung to the hope that her mother was still alive, because at least she still had that hope. So many others didn't.

Her eyes shifted back to the house Cynthia resided in. Even she had lost her sister, who was made a public example by Team Galactic.

"Dawn!" She and Piplup both jumped, and she had to lunge forward to grab her Pokémon so he wouldn't plummet down the cliff side.

She looked around, her long hair whipping around her with the motion. "Barry! Piplup almost fell!"

"Oh, sorry," he said almost carelessly as he hurried over it. "Is it true? The rumours?"

"What rumors?"

"That Paul's here and he fought off an army of Galactics with his bare hands?"

"He got shot and I fought them off with my Pokémon," she deadpanned. It was sad how she could use that as casual conversation now, like it wasn't a big deal.

Suddenly, an idea hit the blue-eyed girl. She grinned and said, "He's recovering in the Pokémon Center, but Cynthia's keeping him locked up out of suspicion. I trust him though."

"What?" Barry appeared positively outraged. "That's not cool at all! Why would she lock up Paul? He could be mad helpful! I'm going to go talk to her! Fine her even!"

"Or you could not." Dawn watched with both fascination and annoyance as Barry seemed to instantly calm at the amused voice.

She looked around him and scowled at the boy that was there. "Lucas! I was trying to get him to go bother her!" Dawn had known Lucas for a long time because he was around Twinleaf Town a lot with Barry when they were younger, even if he didn't live there. They were known to be the best of friends, and he was one of the only people that could calm the blond. Even if it was only for a couple seconds to let someone breathe.

"Sorry," he held up his hands in surrender. "I just...Cynthia seems stressed."

"She is. I peeked and it looks like we're going to be in trouble with the money."

"I figured something like that would happen eventually." He looked down at the town below them. "The Indigo League still exists and is fighting back from Johto, keeping it safe at the same time. Hoenn's league is still intact too. Us? This is all we've got. We're not taking in any money or anything." Lucas shook his head. "If Cynthia's really worrying about it, it must be bad."

"Think there's anything we can do?" Dawn asked him. Lucas was smart, and fairly level-headed, so she trusted that he wouldn't come up with some ridiculous scenario.

"I think we should go set Paul free, he'd know what to do!" Barry suddenly exclaimed, causing Piplup to jump again. Lucas barely had the chance to even try to restrain his friend before he was off.

The two watched him go before looking at one another and shaking their heads with exasperation. Lucas kicked at the ground and then asked, "Dawn?"

"Hmm?"

"Can we trust Paul? I mean, I heard some things about him...the type of person he can be."

Dawn bit her lip for a moment, weighing her choice of words. "Paul can be cold and stubborn. Sometimes he can even seem heartless, but he's a good person too. I think we can trust him. I really do."

Lucas slowly nodded his head. "Alright. I'll trust you on that one." He looked off in the distance, navy eyes focusing on the Pokémon Center. "Besides, maybe he knows more about Team Rocket than we do. We could really use something right about now. Anything."

"Yeah, we really could," Dawn agreed as she hugged Piplup close, staring out over the town with sad eyes. No one said it, but they were really losing hope, and they were losing it fast.

...

It was no surprise that rumours of their little rebellion's money problems were already spreading. Barry did know about it, after all. People whispered in hushed voices in their makeshift meal hall, and already, Dawn couldn't help but notice that their meal was a little smaller than normal. They were going to have to start cutting corners to at least keep everyone fed and safe.

Dawn sat at a long, wooden table beside Zoey, who was watching Barry, Lucas, Kenny and a Kantonian boy that they met, Ritchie, argue over something quietly. Ritchie got caught up in the madness too when it began and ended up in Celestic Town along with them, though his story wasn't an uncommon one. What made him stand out was the fact that he was apparently friends with Ash Ketchum too.

The blue-haired girl smiled just slightly at the thought. It really shouldn't have surprised her. Ash made friends wherever he went.

Shaking off that thought, she leaned closer to Zoey and asked, "What are they going on about?"

"They came up with a harebrained plan on how to get more money," the redhead replied, jerking her finger at Ritchie and Barry. "Kenny was arguing with Lucas at first but now I think it's three against one."

"It's not harebrained though!" Kenny insisted, turning his attention to them. "I thought about it and it's really smart."

"Okay, how?"

"Ash."

"Excuse me?"

"Team Rocket wants Ash alive and they're offering a big reward for him. So we give him Ash and get the reward."

"Excuse me?" Dawn repeated again in a much more scandalized voice.

"Not really Ash," Ritchie butted in before Barry (Dawn?) could bury them. "Me." Zoey snorted at that. "What? Just dye my hair and give me some contacts. Ash and I look a lot alike anyway and we both have a Pikachu. You 'trade' me in, get the money, and then you have someone on the inside who can figure out where they're taking all the prisoners. Put a tracker on me or something."

"That's a terrible idea," the girl said bluntly as she pushed a little bit of her food to Piplup, who ate it eagerly. "Who knows what they'd do to you. And what if they made sure it was Ash before giving the money?"

"That's what I said!" Lucas exclaimed, pointing at her.

"We need to do something, Dawn," Kenny said, his voice lowered. "It doesn't look like anyone else, even Cynthia, is going to."

...

"Why do you keep coming back here?" Paul asked Dawn. He had been awake for a few days by this point, and was very unhappy with the fact that he was shackled to a bed.

"They want to know why Team Rocket is after you and were going to send other people in to interrogate you," she admitted. "I stepped in and said maybe you'd be more likely to talk to a familiar face." She paused for a moment. "Besides, I did save you."

Paul was silent as he contemplated that. "What are you doing here? In this place? It's that rebellion I kept hearing about, I know that, but why are you here specifically?"

"I...I was in Snowpoint visiting Zoey and Candice," Dawn admitted, turning her eyes to Piplup as the Pokémon wandered the room. "We were supposed to watch Ash's match in Kalos, but then he vanished. I tried to get a hold of him even after they said that he was found, but the phones wouldn't do anything. I didn't get it. Team Galactic must have been doing something to them. When Cerulean City was attacked by Manaphy, Team Galactic showed up here again." She didn't even understand how they managed to rally without Cyrus, but apparently he was back, somehow. "They started rounding people up and trying to take them. Candice fought while Zoey, me and a few others got away. We ended up here and Cynthia's grandmother took us in and protected us. It's really hard to get here, you know."

"The rumours say that the rebellion's stationed in a big city like Hearthome City, so I guess this is smart. A little place like this?" Paul looked away. "What do you do? Not the group. You."

"Not much, but I want to do more. I don't...I don't want to just sit here and wait for whatever's coming. That's why I patrol around the woods sometimes." She paused. "My mom's gone and I have no idea where she is or if she's okay and I want to know. I want to do something about it. About this."

"You want to fight?" His skepticism was obvious.

"You don't think I can?" She crossed her arms. "Why? Because I'm a coordinator? Because I'm young? I took out two Rockets on my own." She let her arms fall. "Why were they chasing you? You rejected them and then...what? Just ran?"

"No." Paul admitted. "No. I rejected them and they just walked away. Then they took Reggie." She blinked at that. "So unlike you, I actually went to find my brother. They caught me and I fought but my Pokémon were injured too badly. You know the rest."

Dawn wet her lips. "Do you know anything? Anything that could help us? Find my mother. Find your brother."

"No, but we might be able to talk to some people that can." He looked away.

"Who? WE can go to Cynthia and—."

"No!" He looked around so quickly that she worried he'd get whiplash. "She kept me locked up for over a week in this room because she doesn't trust me. Why should I trust her? There are spies everywhere."

"So why are you telling me?" Dawn asked after a moment.

Paul thought on that briefly and when he spoke, it was almost hesitant. "I guess, against my better judgment, I do trust you. Do you believe me?"

Dawn stared at Paul unsurely, biting her lip a bit. She had a lot of reasons to trust him, but she also had a lot of reasons to be wary. Briefly, she wondered what Ash would do if he were there, but realized that the thought process was a bit ridiculous. Ash and Paul might have fought their fair share of times, but in the end, Ash's decision would have been obvious.

...

The air was cold that night, twisting in front of Dawn as she quickly made her way across the yard, her bag across her shoulder, Paul's heavier one that she stole from storage on her back. She carried Piplup in her arms, not wanting the Pokémon to wander off and get them caught.

This was wrong in a way, she knew that. Cynthia had her reasons for not wanting to trust Paul, but the young woman was just one person, and Dawn knew that she was doing the right thing. Cynthia wanted to protect them all, but keeping them this sheltered and away from danger wasn't what they needed anymore.

She snuck into the Pokémon Center, glad that Nurse Joy never locked the doors anymore, just in case. She hurried down the hall and into Paul's room. He was already awake, and turned his attention to her as she entered.

"So you did show up," he noted.

"Of course I did." What did he expect? That she'd change her mind? Dawn snorted lightly at the thought as she took her barrett out of her hair and started fiddling with the cuff on his wrist. It took a minute, and Dawn nearly cheered when she heard a soft click and the clasp came undone.

Paul got up, shaking out his wrist and stretching his legs. He winced a bit from the light pain on his side, but it wasn't that bad. He nodded at Dawn and started digging through the bag that she brought, relieved to see his winter jacket and his Pokéballs.

He eyed the younger teenager and frowned. "If you want to do this, we're not turning back, you got that, right?"

"I don't know what you think I am, but I'm not a coward, Paul Wayland," Dawn replied, straightening her shoulders and staring at him fiercely, Piplup mimicking her. "So let's go to...wherever it is we're going." He wouldn't tell her earlier, saying that the walls could have eyes and ears, even though she insisted that it didn't.

"Good thing you dressed warm," Paul noted as he hauled his pack onto his back, making his way

towards the door. He peered outside cautiously. "We're going up to Snowpoint City."

"Snowpoint?" Dawn asked warily, remembering the last time that she was there. Piplup hummed his disapproval as well. "The person we're trying to find is up there?"

"Not a specific person, but hopefully, someone who will be willing to talk." Paul looked over his shoulder at her. "That's where they're bringing in the new Team Rocket recruits in a couple days."

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A loud siren startled everyone awake. Serena didn't even have time to be flustered about the fact that she fell asleep leaning on Clemont, nor did she have the time to complain about her aching back. On her other side, May jerked up just as quickly, looking around with wide eyes. All around them, other Team Rocket recruits were all looking around, just as confused as they were.

"Fun time's over," a stern, male voice came over the intercom. "We will be arriving in Sinnoh within the hour. Proceed down to the ballroom." The once easygoing, almost friendly looking full-fledged members of Team Rocket were now tall and foreboding.

That's when Serena knew what was going on. They lured everyone into a false sense of fun and security, and now the training was going to begin.

"We need to find everyone else," Clemont said with a whisper.

"We're supposed to stay apart," May reminded him.

"I know, but I think that's a bigger risk right now."

Serena silently agreed with Clemont, and the three of them started making their way across the ship, looking for their disguised friends.

"There you guys are!" A voice called out after a while. Serena looked around and saw an unfamiliar teenager approach them, and realized a minute later that it was Gary.

"Where's L—Fern?" May asked, looking around him.

"She went to go find Tom and Anne," he said smoothly, not stumbling over their fake names at all. "We're going to the back corner so we can all meet up, come on." They nodded and followed him.

A couple floors below them, Leaf walked slowly, like she was more bored than anything else and trying desperately not to stand out. No one really gave her a second glance, much to her relief.

"Le—Fern!"

She twisted around, relief passing over her face as she saw Ash and Misty hurrying towards her. "Oh thank Mew, where were you guys?"

"Never mind that," Misty said, her voice lowering as she looked around suspiciously. "Our wigs are on the right way, right?"

Leaf blinked. "Yeah but why—oh!" A smirk rose up on her lips. "I get it." She turned away dramatically. "Here I was actually getting info last night, working hard to find things out like where a lot of prisoners were being held in Sinnoh, and other useful things like that, and you," she spun around and pointed at them, "were getting laid." She had to put her hand over her mouth to stop her laughter at how red their faces turned. Then another thought hit her. "Oh Arceus what if the rooms

had hidden cameras? Old Gio would be looking all over for you and when he does find some trace of you it's..." She couldn't even finish that sentence, breathing heavily to prevent herself from laughing.

Misty looked at her lividly. "Does getting info have anything to do with that hickey on your neck?"

This time she shrunk down a bit, she was sure she had hidden that beneath her turtleneck. "Well...no...umm..."

"No? So..." Misty trailed off, her own smirk appearing as she put two and two together. "You and Gary had your own fun, huh?"

"He wishes it was your type of fun," she said nonchalantly, trying to turn the conversation back on them.

"Why?" Ash whined, slapping his gloved palm against his face. "We need to go." Being the voice of reason was really mind-boggling, but really, they had places to go and things to do that did not involve conversations like this.

"Fine, fine." Leaf waved her hand at him. "We'll talk more later." The three of them hurried up the stairs, staying close together as they moved through the other confused Rocket recruits.

Somehow, they managed to get over to where their friends were, and Ash felt himself sighing in relief. Everyone was okay.

"The fun ends here," the man who had seemed so open with them yesterday said harshly. "You have dedicated your lives to Team Rocket and you will be trained rigorously. It's time to drop any relationships, any attachments. The only thing that matters to you now is Team Rocket, and Team Rocket alone. Well, and our allies, of course. Welcome the man who helped establish our Sinnoh Training Center, the leader of Team Galactic, Cyrus." It was obvious that they were supposed to applaud.

At first, Ash was incredibly confused. Cyrus was either dead or off in his own world, or something along those lines. How could he be here? Cynthia had shared her extreme doubts of the man ever coming back. Then he saw Cyrus and flinched. He physically felt sick as he stared at the man, horror welling up inside of him, not even bothering to take in what the man was saying. There was only one thought on his mind. They needed to get out of there and they needed to do it fast.

He tuned back in as Cyrus said, "To prove your worth and loyalty, you must complete your very first task." He stared around at them all. "We are in Snowpoint City. To begin, you must take your packs and jump off the side of the ship and swim to shore." People started whispering, because the waters around Snowpoint were absolutely frigid and a person could only survive in it for so long. "Get to the dock, and you will be rewarded with an injection of Ice Heal and brought to your new living quarters. If you don't, well, they say freezing is just like falling asleep." He paused once again and motioned to the door. "Begin."

The people who really wanted to be a part of Team Rocket were the first to get up and head out the door, but so many people were reluctant. Ash leaned towards his friends and whispered, "Guys, we need to get out of here, now."

"Shouldn't we try to stay and get away when we get to shore?" May asked, all too reluctant to jump into the icy water.

"No, Ash is right," Gary agreed. "That injection, I'd bet you anything that there's a microscopic

tracker in it, or something like that. If we get those, we're screwed."

"That actually makes sense, and it's entirely possible," Clemont added. "I'm with them."

"Okay, so we jump, I'll call out Gyarados as quickly as you can, and we get out of here and to shore somewhere else as fast as we can," Misty toned in. "Everyone still have the breathing apparatuses I gave you?" She made sure to insist that everyone get one back in Hoenn. It would give them a chance if they needed to hide beneath the water.

"It's better than fighting everyone here," Serena said with a nod of her head.

"You have no idea," Ash mumbled, but there was no time to question him. Instead, they all made their way through the door and towards the deck.

People were jumping off in groups of ten at a time, some smacking into one another as they fell, some not coming up from the water at all. Something must have been on their side, because they all approached the edge at the same time. Misty had her pack off of her back, holding it at her side already. With subtle nods, they, along with a couple other recruits, jumped and plunged into the icy water below.

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Dawn didn't know what she expected on this trip to Snowpoint, but actually being able to get into the city was probably one of those things. Snowpoint was so heavily guarded though, that they couldn't get anywhere near it. Paul's frustration was obvious as he fumed about it, trying to come up with another plan.

She let him stew in his anger, heading down to the water to let Piplup wash his feathers. The cold didn't bother him at all. She was just sitting on a large rock that she had cleared of snow earlier, enjoying the view, when a Gyarados rose up out of the water, carrying several people along with it.

Dawn gasped and jumped to her feet, hand going back to her Pokéballs as she eyed them warily, the people clearly didn't see her, too focused on getting to shore, and that was fine with her. Her heart started beating heavily when she realized that they all had Team Rocket uniforms on.

Piplup ruffled his feathers, ready to pounce at his trainer's command, but Dawn chose to stay back, hiding behind the rock she had been sitting on, and observe them for now.

"We need to get these clothes off and change, now," someone instructed, and they were tossing their bags to the ground. Dawn blinked with confusion when they pulled completely different bags out of there, along with other clothes. No one really cared that they were a mix of teenage boys as girls, they just started pulling off their wet clothes and replacing it with their dry ones, survival overpowering modesty.

What ended up startling her though, was when one of the girl lost her hair. Literally. It fell to the ground when she pulled off her wet shirt and tugged on a dry one, changing her bra beneath the shirt. Dawn knew that red hair anywhere. It was only after everyone else was decent and shedding their own wigs that she put two and two together. She didn't recognize the two blonds, but everyone else was a familiar face. What sealed the deal was when one of the boys shed his colour contacts and released a very familiar Pikachu from his Pokéball.

"Ash?"

They all jumped and looked around, most of them still only half-dressed in warm clothes. They all just stared at one another in confusion before May broke the silence. "Dawn? What...? How...?"

She looked around at the others hopelessly.

Gary snorted and shook his head in disbelief. "Still ended up where we were supposed to be."

"I guess we have a lot to explain, don't we?" Ash asked almost sheepishly, motioning towards their discarded uniforms.

Dawn slowly nodded her head, and at that moment, Paul came barreling out of the woods. She'd like to believe that maybe he heard voices and was worried about her, but Dawn knew that she'd never get him to admit something like that.

Paul stared at them, and everyone else stared back.

"And I think you have some explaining to do too," Misty added, nodding at the younger girl. "But first, dry clothes before we freeze." That snapped everyone back into action, hauling on the last of their basic clothes before grabbing their boots and winter jackets.

Pikachu scurried over to Piplup, who waved excitedly. The two Pokémon started talking in hushed voices. Dawn had no idea what was going on, or why her friends had just shown up on this beach outside of Snowpoint City dressed up like Team Rocket. If she was honest with herself, she wasn't even sure she wanted to know what was going on, in fear that she'd just get dragged into it.

Who was she kidding? The second she saw them, Dawn was already involved.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

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Through The Ice And Cold

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Clemont almost gasped when he plunged into the icy water, but managed to stop himself so he wouldn't inhale anything. Cold to the point where everything felt like he was being stabbed with hot knives, the blond boy struggled to try and stay up closer to the surface with the weight of his uniform. It was something that hadn't really occurred to him when he jumped, and that was strange for him. He always thought about the little things like that.

Suddenly, someone grabbed his bag. He looked around, unable to see clearly in the water, but a moment later something was shoved in his face. The breathing device. Relief rushed through him and Clemont gladly took it, a bit of panic fading as he was able to breathe again. The person that helped him pulled out a Pokéball, and a large Gyarados appeared.

Misty made sure he was holding onto her Pokémon before she expertly swam around, making sure everyone had their breathing device and was holding onto Gyarados before she got hers. They only had so long to get away from Team Rocket and out of the water.

Even though they were completely in the redhead's element, she was honestly terrified. It was so cold and if they didn't get out of the water, and their wet clothes, they were going to freeze to death.

Making sure that everyone was holding onto Gyarados, she nudged the Pokémon and he began to swim. She nudged him a little harder and he went faster. Misty was working on communicating with her Pokémon with hand gestures, but they hadn't got to the point where she was able to get across what she wanted. Especially not while they were speeding away in ice cold water. She'd get left behind if she let go.

Ash shifted a bit, closing his eyes, and in the darkness of the water, they could all see a faint glow to his hand. Gyarados suddenly changed directions.

Without warning, they surfaced, the chilly air absolutely biting against their skin. Serena ripped out her breathing device but almost wished that she didn't. The fresh air was so cold. Gyarados moved into the shallow water quickly, and they all scrambled up to the shore covered in rocks and a bit of ice.

"We need to get these clothes off and change now," Leaf said through chattering teeth, her lips an unhealthy tint of blue.

Normally, Serena would have been utterly horrified by the comment, especially with Ash, Clemont and Gary there. The reality was, this was a life or death situation and there was no time to worry about that. Especially not since everyone else was quick to start shedding their clothes.

May tossed aside the Team Rocket issued pack, happy to see her own again. Her hands shook as she opened up her bag and tugged out her clothes, along with her gloves, a winter hat, boots and her jacket. Now was not the time for skimpy summer clothes.

There was a silent understanding that everyone was to mind their own business as they dug through their bags to retrieve other clothes and then strip down. In a different scenario, the whole situation would have been completely ridiculous, but this was a necessity.

Gary certainly felt a ton better when he had a warm pair of pants and a shirt on again. Though his hair was still wet, his skin icy to touch, it was much better than the drenched Team Rocket uniform.

He glanced over at the sound of a Pokéball opening, watching as Pikachu appeared. The electric-type Pokémon shook his head and stretched out before turning to Ash, who was still just wearing his jeans and a t-shirt rather than getting his sweater or jacket on first.

Ash reached out to Pikachu, who leapt into his arms and nuzzled him with a happy coo. He hid his face in the Pokémon's fur, relishing the warmth as he hugged his best friend. "I'm so sorry. You're never going back into a Pokéball again. Never. I promise." He hated how many times Pikachu was forced to go into his Pokéball lately. Ash swore when he was younger that he'd never do that to Pikachu, that he'd never let anyone put him in a Pokéball again, but there they were.

"Pikapi. Pika pi Pikachu pi pika." Pikachu patted his cheek and smiled at him. The Pokémon hated being away, but he understood why it had to happen.

"Ash?"

Everyone jumped at the familiar (to most of them) voice. Ash blinked, and stared in confusion at the young teenager before him. She definitely looked like Dawn, but what were the odds that they'd actually run into her the second they officially stepped into Sinnoh?

"Dawn?" May broke the silence, her voice wavering. "What...? How...?" She looked around at everyone else, as if they had an answer.

Gary snorted and shook his head in disbelief. Of course they ended up running into someone that was bound to end up on their journey with them. Out of everyone, it made the most sense in his mind for Dawn to be a part of this whole mess. "Still ended up where we're supposed to be." He was starting to wonder if any of his actions were really his own anymore.

Dawn's dark blue eyes looked towards their pile of discarded clothes. Ash followed her gaze and rubbed the back of his head, holding Pikachu in his other arm. "I guess we have a lot to explain, don't we?"

She slowly nodded her head, and that was when Ash felt it. His brown eyes snapped towards the tree line as he felt another familiar aura rushing towards them. He knew that he knew this aura, but couldn't quite place it yet.

Suddenly, Paul burst out of the woods, his cheeks red from his mad dash through the cold. He

stared at them oddly, and everyone else stared back. Ash opened his mouth to say something, to ask why Dawn had Paul of all people with her, but Misty ended up speaking first.

"And I think you have some explaining to do too," Misty said with a nod. "But first, dry clothes before we freeze."

That spurred everyone into action. Ash dug through his bag until he found his warmer clothes, including his thick, winter jacket and a really warm pair of socks. Until Misty spoke up, he didn't realize how cold he still was.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ash saw Pikachu run to talk to Piplup and smiled a bit. He turned towards the two Pokémon, watching them talk quietly, and thought back to a time long ago when he thought things were too much for him to handle. When the world was riding on his shoulders and he still wasn't quite sure why. Eventually, Ash thought he understood it and could accept it. Now he realized he was just kidding himself.

"What do we do with these?" Serena spoke up, breaking the silence as she motioned to the Team Rocket uniforms.

"Burn them!" Leaf exclaimed a little too excitedly.

"That'll draw attention over here," Gary replied, nudging her gently. Leaf just rolled her eyes and muttered something about him killing all her fun. "Toss 'em in the water. After what they're doing over there, it probably wouldn't be that surprising for people to drown."

"People drowning?" Dawn cut in. "What are you guys talking about?"

"We need to get away from here first," Ash said suddenly. He looked back around at the water as he zipped up his blue and white winter jacket. "Team Galactic or Team Rocket could come by here."

"We came here looking to get into that stupid training camp," Paul spoke up suddenly. "We're not just leaving until we get what we're looking for."

"You're not going to find anything there," Leaf spoke up, putting her hands on her hips. "There are too many people there."

"Not to mention Cyrus," Misty added grimly.

"What were you looking for?" Clemont asked, his voice almost guarded as he regarded Paul. The older boy was intimidating, there was absolutely no denying that. He wouldn't have said anything, but the fact that Ash wasn't glaring at him or trying to get them to run was enough for Clemont to decide that this person wasn't a threat to them.

Paul didn't answer him, prompting Dawn to roll her eyes. She knew from talking to Ash that this must have been Clemont and there was no reason to distrust him. "We're trying to find out where Team Rocket and Team Galactic's big prison is."

Misty and Ash both jerked and looked over at Leaf with wide eyes. She blinked at Dawn with surprise before looking at Ash. "Okay, this is getting creepy. The one piece of information I get just happens to be what they're looking for and we just happen to run into them? What the hell?"

"You know where it is?" Dawn asked, gaping at the other girl in shock. "How?"

"I'll explain on the way...away from here," Leaf assured her. "As long as you catch us up to speed

on what's going on in Sinnoh." She glanced at Paul. "Is that okay with you, grumpy?"

Ash smiled a little bit at that, and Paul just glared at her.

"It's fine," Dawn interrupted. "Come on, we can go back to Celestic Town."

"Celestic Town? What's there?" Ash asked her curiously.

"What's left of our little rebellion."

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Dawn was the perfect person to tell stories too. She listened with rapt attention, gasping and laughing at the right moments, not interrupting even once, even during the moments that made her tear up. She didn't once question anything she said. She knew the type of adventures they had in the past and knew that no one had any reason to make any of it up. Paul on the other hand, while he didn't say anything, was clearly skeptical of their tale.

May insisted on telling the story of how they were attacked on the train. She stopped and started, she trailed off and her voice shook, but she needed to tell this part. She needed to talk about Drew again. The wounds were still so very fresh even though it felt like such a long time had passed. It was only two days.

That made the brunette pause in her story long enough for Misty to pick it up and keep talking. It was only two days. They would have been grieving still, but they couldn't. They had to keep moving on.

"Oh May," Dawn said, tears sparkling in her eyes. She reached out and put an arm around the brunette as they walked across the snowy ground. She didn't apologize, she didn't ask if her friend was okay. There was no reason to and May was honestly glad that she didn't. She could keep herself together but felt like, if someone asked her if she was okay, she'd break apart. Drew was gone, her parents were wanted and while they were never found it was still horrible not to know where they were, and with the revelation that the Teams were killing legendaries to replace them, she was worried about Manaphy's fate as well. The only comfort that she had was Ash's assurance that Max was safe. Tracey sent him a message about it via his Pokédex before that went dark and they lost all communication with that group.

Serena looked back at the two girls, slowing a bit until she was beside them, putting a hand on May's arm. The brunette smiled at both of them weakly.

"So they're keeping them all on Newmoon Island?" Paul muttered, his brow furrowing as he walked. That actually complicated things a lot. He had a lot of Pokémon, but his selection of water Pokémon that could actually make it across that much water was limited.

"Newmoon Island," Ash repeated, his brow furrowing. He knew that he should have known why that name was important to him. He must have gone there on his travels in Sinnoh, but sometimes island and city names blended together and he wasn't completely sure of where everything was.

"There are probably a lot of Team Rocket and Team Galactic members there," Leaf piped up. Her dusty-brown eyes looked directly over at Paul. "I doubt one person would be enough to take them all on." Leaf liked to think of herself as a perceptive person, and though she didn't know Paul, she knew what was going through his mind already: how quickly he could ditch them to go on his own.

"Maybe a lot of us together could though," Misty said with a shrug. "We don't necessarily have to

be stronger than them, just smarter."

"And then what? Go all the way to Newmoon Island to take them on? All these other Teams, they're just being used to distract everyone from the big problem," Gary pointed out. "Team Rocket. Everyone else is just to divide us all, to make us lose focus on the big issue."

"So you'd rather chase around magical balls that might save the world?" Paul asked, his voice sharp with annoyance. "Stopping Team Galactic, saving those people, that would be real. That would be progress."

Ash looked over to him, eyes narrowing. "Nobody said that stopping the Teams was a bad idea. If you think you've got a better idea of what's going on than Arceus does...well..." He just flailed his arms, unable to think of how to end that sentence.

"Please share it," Misty added for him. Ash nodded his head in agreement.

"I know that he's not living through this, we are." Paul looked forward to watch where he was going, ending the conversation there.

"We should try to find a place to set up camp soon," Serena spoke up. "It looks like it's going to snow and we don't want to get caught in that if we don't have to." She was right, if the white clouds above their heads were any indications, a storm was coming and they really needed to find shelter before it hit.

"There are caves in the mountains over that way," Dawn said, glancing down at the compass that she pulled out of her bag. She nodded towards the west. "If we hurry, we'll probably be able to get there before the storm starts."

Nobody, not even Paul, could find a flaw in her suggestion, so they quickly switched directions and headed the way she indicated.

Though Dawn stayed close to May, who remained silent during the entire exchange, she looked towards Serena. "You're Serena, right? And Clemont? I heard a lot about you."

"We heard a lot about you too," Clemont replied. "Ash really likes talking about his friends."

Dawn laughed at that, and May cracked a smile. "That's true. Maybe you guys can fill me in on a few things too. I'm thinking you're probably the sane ones in this group."

"Hey," May said, nudging her side.

"I stand by my statement."

May laughed. It was a short, but genuine one, and that in turn made both Clemont and Serena smile.

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They shed their winter coats as they headed towards Celestic Town. Though it was still chilly, it was nothing compared to Snowpoint so it seemed warm to them.

Serena brushed her bangs out of her face as they finally reached the ridge where they could see the small town hidden by the fog. Though there were tents strewn everywhere, she honestly expected more from Sinnoh's rebellion.

Something squeezed inside of her. Surely this couldn't be everyone that was willing to fight back. Sinnoh was a massive region, there must have been others hidden in more places.

At the same time though, from what Dawn told them, Team Galactic already owned Sinnoh in the same way, maybe even more, than Team Rocket owned Kanto.

"Come on," Dawn urged them, leading the way down the ridges and hills. "I should probably go first. Cynthia's probably not going to be too happy to see us."

"Right, you basically broke him out of jail and ran off, right?" Gary asked, pointing over his shoulder at Paul. He was honestly a bit surprised that the other teenager was still tagging along with them. Then again, Gary already knew that Paul wasn't a stupid person, having interacted with him years ago, so he probably saw the logic in not running off on his own.

Trying to confront anyone that way would just get them killed.

There were a couple people out and about when they got into Celestic Town. A few people turned towards them skeptically, but they seemed to quickly recognize Dawn.

One thing that Clemont realized though was that they kept doing a double-take when they saw Ash. It made him worry. They all had bounties on their heads (except for May at this point), but the one for Ash was pretty hefty the last he saw. He was honestly worried that someone would turn him in for the reward, especially if Dawn's description of their money problems said anything.

He wasn't the only one that noticed. Clemont saw Leaf's hand twitch by one of her Pokéballs, and Gary reached out, touching her arm to get her attention. Leaf looked at him and he just shook his head, though it was obvious that he was wary too.

"Ash?" They all jumped at the sudden, loud exclamation, more than one set of hands reaching for their Pokéballs.

The boy in question just looked around curiously, a blond boy running at him. His orange eyes went wide as he got right in Ash's face, causing the other teen to back up a bit. He looked around at the three people that followed him over, pale and horrified. "Oh no. Oh this is bad. You can't be here."

"Barry...what?" Whatever reception Ash was expecting, it wasn't that. He watched his friend and former rival nervously pace back and forth for a moment. Ash winced and jerked back, not expect Barry to tug off his hat and start messing with his hair. Pikachu yelped with alarm and jumped to the ground, and watched the whole thing with a startled expression. "What the hell, Barry?" Ash shoved him back. "What's wrong with you?" He looked around at Barry, Zoey and even the other boy he didn't know, for answers. None of them said anything, all looking equally shocked. That made something twist horribly inside of Ash. He didn't need Aura to know that something was wrong.

"If they know you're here then they'll know he's not you!" Barry's loud and worried explanation startled Ash even more.

His brow furrowed and he looked behind him at his friends, who were just as lost as him. The only exceptions were Paul, who was watching with borderline disinterest, and Dawn, who was contemplative. He looked back at Barry. "What are you talking about?"

"You didn't!" Dawn asked, her mouth dropping in horror as everything clicked together. She walked up to the other Sinnoh natives, eyes pleading. "Please tell me he didn't."

"He did," Lucas spoke up grimly. He huffed and took off his hat, running a hand through his short, navy hair. "A bunch of people got behind the idea because we were running out of provisions. He went to Cynthia and told her it was a good idea. Other people agreed." Lucas' eyes turned to Ash. "Looking at the real deal, I think they did a really good job."

"What?" Ash asked again, even more confused than before.

"They even gave us the money right then and there," Kenny added almost sadly, completely ignoring Ash.

Misty took a step forward, glaring at them. "Maybe you should tell us what's going on? Instead of just freaking out?"

"So I don't know what Dawn told you," Zoey nodded towards the younger girl, "but this little rebellion against Team Rocket and Team Galactic that we have going on is in trouble because of money. So a ridiculous scheme to get some was hatched. This other boy, looks a ton like you, Ash, and he says he knows you too, decided to collect the bounty that's on your head. We got him to look just like you. The idea was two-fold, we get the money and he gets inside the prison to scope it out."

Ash just stared blankly at them.

"So, you handed some poor shmuck disguised as Ash over to Team Rocket to get some money?" Gary spoke up, crossing his arms in front of him. He cocked an eyebrow as he regarded the group. "Did you get the money? Or are you waiting on that?" The sarcasm in his voice was almost palpable.

"We got the money," Kenny said, almost offended. "They gave it to us right then and there."

"Uh huh, and did you check that money for trackers?" Gary's question made everyone pause. Lucas' eyes went wide and he bolted towards one of the larger houses. "I'll take that as a no."

"They couldn't make trackers that small, could they?" Kenny asked unsurely.

"Yeah, they can," Clemont spoke up. "It's not even that hard if they have enough resources."

Kenny looked like he was going to ask who Clemont was, but Ash suddenly broke out of his stunned silence, eyes narrowed. "Who was it? You said I know him, so who was it?"

"Ritchie," Dawn spoke up. "Ritchie Jayne."

That name didn't seem to mean anything to anyone else, but Misty's mouth fell open in shock and Ash blanched.

"Do they have trackers on them?" Gary asked. Lucas' eyes went wide and he bolted out of the room.

"Ritchie, as in Ritchie Jayne?" Misty asked.

"Yeah, that's him." Kenny looked away nervously. Despite his earlier confidence in the idea, he knew it was a stupid one all along. They were desperate though. "Like we said, a bunch of people agreed on the idea and Cynthia had no choice but to let him do it or they would have went ahead anyway. We needed the money. As long as the real Ash stays out of sight, they'll probably just keep him in a jail cell, right?"

"No they won't," Ash shook his head. Pikachu stared up at him with worry as he grasped the tips of his hair and tugged. "Oh Mew, they'll tell Cyrus. We need to get him out of there."

"You're wanted alive," May pointed out, having been listening to the whole exchange silently. "I'm sure he'll be fine, right? Like Kenny said, just in a jail cell." She was trying to be optimistic, but it was clear that she was wary too.

"No, they're not! Cyrus isn't real!" Everyone stopped talking to him and just stared.

"Do you need to lay down?" Kenny asked hesitantly.

"Do I—no!" Ash waved his hands. "I thought it was weird because he went into that other universe and—and he's not real. He's like the Mirage Pokémon."

"What's a Mirage Pokémon?" Zoey asked, brow furrowing. She glanced at the other people that showed up with him, all appearing confused except for May and Misty, who seemed just as horrified as him.

"Like that time Doctor Yung made us think that the Mirage Master was a different person than him!" May blurted out.

"Same thing. Maybe stronger." Ash held out his arm and Pikachu jumped back up onto it, shifting close to Ash.

Much like everyone else had completely ignored Ash's questions earlier, their group was now ignoring them as they started talking.

"Wait, if he's controlling a Mirage Pokémon – a Darkrai, right?" Dawn nodded her head. "Right, if he's controlling a Darkrai, but he's a Mirage, who's controlling him? And why bother?" Clemont asked.

"Giovanni?" Serena suggested.

"He's got a point though." Leaf nodded at Clemont. "Why bother? Why not just try to get someone else to helm Team Galactic like they did for Aqua and Magma?"

"It doesn't matter! That wasn't my point!" Ash waved his hands in the air and everyone once again looked at him. "I bet you anything that through the Mirage Cyrus or whatever, someone will hear that they got me. We know they probably want a Mirage Arceus, and Doctor Yung would probably love to see me again, so..." Ash didn't know if he could say it.

"So they'll question him, and realize he's not you," Paul spoke up for the first time.

"No," Ash shook his head. He reached up, tilting the brim of his hat down over his eyes a little more. "Last time Young had me, he went through my memories. It was...horrible. That's what he'll do to Ritchie, then he'll realize he's not me."

Misty breathed out and shook her head. "Then they'll kill him."

"Who is going to kill who?"

They all looked around, staring at the tall, blonde woman before them with stunned expressions.

"Cynthia," Ash muttered under his breath.

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Cynthia stared at Ash with curious eyes. The teenager stared back, apparently not the least bit intimidated by her. That was certainly new. Then again, none of the others really seemed to shy away from her like so many did. There was something behind their eyes, something that made her title of Champion one of the least intimidating things they had faced recently.

One thing she had noticed was the side-glances at Ash when she was asking them all questions earlier. It was the reason she asked to speak to him alone. They were clearly deferring to him as the leader of their little group, but that didn't really surprise her.

When Lance first approached her and said that he wanted her to keep an eye out for a very specific trainer, she had been curious. Lance wasn't the type to take interest in specific people, not that she knew. When she first looked into Ash Ketchum, the one thing that caught her attention was his documented involvement with stopping Team Magma and Team Aqua, not to mention some skirmish with Team Rocket.

When the incident with Team Galactic happened, she got to see Ash Ketchum in action for herself, and suddenly Cynthia could really see what Lance saw. He was young, he still had a long way to go, but he had so much potential that it was almost breathtaking.

Now here they sat across from one another, and she knew that potential had finally bubbled to the surface, but maybe not for the best reasons. His story of how they got there, dressing up as Team Rocket agents and getting on the ship was hard to believe, but she saw no reason for them to lie. There was more to the story though, so much more, and she wanted to know it all.

"Cynthia?" He sounded almost hesitant as he spoke. "I know I shouldn't be thinking about this right now, but I need to know...why did you get a League Sweeper after me?"

Whatever question she had been expecting, it wasn't that. Cynthia kept a passive face as she asked, "How did you know?"

Ash smiled ruefully. "I'm not sure you'd believe me."

She sighed as she remembered that tournament, and how sick to her stomach she felt when she watched Ash's matches. A part of her was hoping that he'd lose to someone else, but it never happened. "I didn't want to. I hate the use of League Sweepers for the most part. We have knocked some unsavory people out over the years. I never understood why anyone would want you knock you out of the competition. No offence, but at the time you wouldn't have made it past a single member of the Elite Four, let alone beat me. There was no reason for it in my mind."

"But...then who?"

"Red," she answered. Cynthia still remembered how surprised she had been to hear from the elusive Pokémon Master, let alone the reason behind his visit was because he wanted to knock a young boy out of the tournament. If Lance's interest meant anything, this really confirmed it for her. There was something special about this boy. "The order came directly from Master Red himself. And it wasn't just me. A Sweeper was put in to knock you out in Unova, but that other boy, he just barely beat you so there was no need for it." She smiled a bit. "Diantha kindly told Red to shove it, that she wasn't going to stop you because he was afraid."

"Afraid?"

Cynthia weighed the pros and cons of telling him the complete truth. In reality, all the secrecy, all the manipulation, suspicion and division was exactly what got them into this mess in the first place. There was no reason to hide anything anymore. "Lance has been watching you for a very long

time. He's even altered the Champions of whatever region you've gone to. We all see it in you. Something special. You're going to be the one to beat him. I think Red knows that too, and it terrifies him."

"Are you saying that Master Red is afraid of me?"

"Maybe not so much of you, but of what he becomes afterwards. Red helped shaped the world around us. What does he have left if he's defeated? You terrify him. You're something special, Ash Ketchum. Maybe more than you know."

More than he knew. That amused Ash in a way. No, it was the opposite way around. Cynthia didn't really know him. Coming into her office, he had been wary, but a part of him could easily accept her story. It must have been hard to say no to the Pokémon Master, and Diantha was the rare exception to actually do it.

Even though she had given in to Red's order, he still trusted her. She was the Champion he knew the best. Not to mention she studied legendary Pokémon. That was his original intention when he agreed to talk to her privately.

Everyone else was talking about finding the Team Galactic prison, and as much as it killed him, Ash knew that he had to focus on other things.

"There's something I need to tell you." She looked at him expectantly. "It's not just luck we're here, we're looking for something."

"Looking for something?" Cynthia's brow furrowed.

"Yeah, the way to defeat Team Rocket."

She leaned back in her chair and eyed him skeptically. "I'm not quite sure I understand. If there was something in Sinnoh that could have stopped them, I would have used it a long time ago."

Ash shifted uncomfortably under her gaze before slowly raising his hand up into the air. A second later, a glowing sphere appeared above it. "You're right, I am different." He said it in a way that implied it was a bad thing. "Arceus sent us to find something that can help him. Something that'll give him the strength to stop all of this, to save everyone. And Cynthia, I think we're running out of time."

She stared at Ash and saw the honesty in his eyes. "Tell me everything."

...

Gary had his map out on the table while they were waiting for Ash. He marked where they were in Sinnoh, and started looking for the points that they had discussed before. He had a question mark over the Gracidea flower garden, and a couple over some other spots.

"This is going to be hard," Serena sighed from a few seats over. "There was no clue at all in that cave."

"There must be some way to figure out where the orbs are," May replied, desperation in her voice. They couldn't fail now, not after Drew had sacrificed himself so that they – that she – could keep going to save the world.

"This is going to be a lot of gut instinct," Leaf admitted. "I'm nearly positive that we'll find the Poison Orb with Shaymin. I joked about it earlier, but it just makes sense with everything else

that's happened in the past."

"Then what?" Clemont groaned as he shook his head. "There are just so many options."

"Darkrai." They all jumped and looked at Cynthia as she and Ash walked forward. "Darkrai has always been particularly protective of Newmoon Island and I'm willing to bet it has to do with one of those orbs. Unfortunately, if your intel is true, this is where Team Rocket and Team Galactic are."

Misty looked back at Ash, who nodded encouragingly, signifying that he had told her all of this.

"So what do we do?" Dawn asked.

"You're going to go on a mission for me," Cynthia said. "Take whatever route you need to, to get whatever it is that you need to find, but then you're going to head over to Newmoon Island. Do not engage anyone there. Just get eyes on it and fall back to Fullmoon Island if it's safe. If not, back to the mainland. Wait for reinforcements."

"Then what?" Paul asked almost eagerly.

"Then we're going to win this battle and get the pieces to win the war, and this time, they won't see us coming."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Somewhere Down The Road

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Serena couldn't sleep. The bed that she was sleeping in was far too comfortable, making her feel like she was going to sink right down to the floor. It was a sad thought, that she was so used to sleeping in tents on the ground, but it was an unavoidable fact.

In the bed across from her, Leaf shifted in her sleep, mumbling lightly under her breath. Moving quietly so she wouldn't wake her roommate up, Serena slipped out of the room and quietly made her way down towards the kitchen that they were told they could use. She quietly got a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. Turning around, Serena jumped and almost dropped the glass when she saw Clemont sitting at the table. He didn't seem to notice her as he fiddled with some little object in his hands. She'd seen him tinkering with that a couple times now, but never thought to ask what it was.

"Clemont?" He jumped at her soft voice, turning around to face her. "Sorry!"

"It's okay." Clemont assured her as he calmed his breathing again. "Can't sleep either?"

"No, I just...I guess I just want to get going," she admitted as she sat across from him. It was strange to admit, but Serena didn't really want to just be idle. She wanted to do something. Her mind drifted back to the last orb that they found, and her gut squeezed when she realized that it was when she and Drew had gone after Ash. Now he was gone.

"Yeah, I feel like that too, even though..." Clemont trailed off, eyes flickering down to the device in his hands.

"Even though what?" She prompted as she took a drink.

"Even though I feel like I'm dead weight sometimes," he admitted.

"You? Dead weight?" Serena raised an eyebrow at him and shook her head. "No. You've helped so many times with your inventions, with things you know that no one else does." She smiled ruefully. "I'm the dead weight."

"No you're not!"

"I'm not a battler, and my Pokémon aren't anywhere near as strong as anyone else's. I'm not super smart or anything like that. I just...take up space." It was something that she had been thinking about for a while. Serena knew what she was, but that didn't stop her from wanting to help in some way.

"That's not true, you know." Clemont shook his head this time. "You went after Ash when everyone else was afraid to, you and Drew. That made a difference to him. You're just...you've been the voice of reason even when I've gotten frustrated, and you know, maybe that's enough. Not everyone has to be a hero, do they? I didn't come along for that."

"Why did you come, Clemont?" Serena asked him curiously, holding her head up with her hands as she leaned forward.

"None of us knew how bad it was going to get. I just...I thought of Bonnie. I thought of her and how she got kidnapped, and how people like that were trying to take over the world. I needed to help, because even if they win, at least I can say I tried to make the world better for my sister." He sighed and looked up at her. "What about you?"

"I thought about staying behind with Bonnie, to keep an eye on her," Serena admitted. "But I guess...it's stupid but I looked at your sister, and I thought about how, if it was me that was kidnapped that day, I probably would have done all the wrong things. I probably would have gotten myself killed. What does that make me? It's selfish, I know that now, but I didn't want to be left behind. I wanted to prove myself." Hearing Clemont's story about how he wanted to at least try to make the world a safer place for his sister embarrassed her because her reasons weren't nearly so noble.

Clemont looked back down at the device in his hand before sliding it across the table to her. "I know it's not pretty but I only had so much. Happy birthday."

Serena's head snapped up, eyes wide. "It's not my birthday."

"No, that was a couple weeks ago. I didn't realize what day it was until today," he admitted. "I was tinkering with this for a while anyway."

She touched the object, realizing that it actually looked more like a necklace with a circular screen on it. She tapped the button on the back curiously, and gasped when the screen came to life with a picture of her and Bonnie. It faded a moment later to another one. "Oh wow."

"It only has so many pictures, I did what I could with what I had. I know it's not pretty but—."

"No, it's great!" Serena smiled at him broadly, her cheeks turning pink. "Thank you so much!"

"Y—you're welcome." Clemont laughed awkwardly. "I'm glad you like it."

She stared at the images as they changed and nodded her head at him. Then a thought occurred to her. "Wait a second! Your birthday is only a couple weeks after mine!"

"Yeah," he shrugged. "It was a couple days ago. Looks like we both missed out."

"Happy sweet sixteen to both of us then," Serena replied dryly.

"Happy sweet sixteen," Clemont agreed. He yawned a bit. "I guess we should try to get some sleep. Need to be up early tomorrow."

"Yeah." They both stood up. "Clemont, thank you again."

"You're welcome."

...

A scream jerked Dawn out of her sleep. It wasn't even that loud, but just so close that it still startled her. It was a strangled, pathetic sound that had her nearly tossing Piplup out of her bed and looking over at the one across from her. The bunk above her squeaked as Zoey looked over with worry.

Dawn lurched across the cool floor, grasping the other girl's shoulder and shaking it gently. "May. May, wake up."

"Drew!" The older girl woke up, startled by her own scream. She breathed heavily and then looked around, eyes peering through the darkness to see where she was. It took a few minutes, but her breathing calmed. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Dawn assured her, smiling and rubbing her shoulder.

"What happened?" Zoey asked, leaning over the edge of the bunk bed to try and see them through the darkness.

May was silent for a moment, breathing heavily. Eyes having adjusted, Dawn could see her shake her head. "Just a nightmare. It's okay."

"You said Drew's name," the blue-haired girl said softly.

May's body tensed up before she sighed and flopped back onto her bed. "Every time I close my eyes I see it. I see his hand slip out of mine. I was holding him up and then he was gone. So I wouldn't fall with him. I just—" Her voice choked up.

"May..." Dawn muttered, not quite sure what to say to her.

"You don't have to come with us tomorrow, you know," May said suddenly. "You can stay here with Zoey and Kenny and everyone. You don't need to do this."

Dawn contemplated her words for a moment before shrugging her shoulders. "You make it sound like you have to, but you don't. You could stay here and help too. We all have a choice. Well, except for Ash." She smiled bitterly. "From the sounds of it, his choices are do this or let everything die so it's not really a choice is it? How...just knowing that, how could I not want to help a friend who has always helped me so much?" She suddenly nudged May over on the bed and laid down beside her, staring at the empty bunk above them. Misty was assigned that one, but she never showed up. "I don't know what happened to my mom, she could very well be in this prison too. I...I need to help. You know?"

"Yeah," May spoke answered quietly. Though Zoey didn't chime in again, it was safe to assume that she was still listening. "I feel the same way." She paused for a moment. "I just don't want to lose anymore friends."

"Then I guess that we need to look after one another, don't we?" It would be a lie to say that Dawn wasn't apprehensive, but it was like May said. The second that they started to explain the story to her, she knew she had to help. Dawn was committed already, and once she set her mind to something, she never backed down.

...

The sun was just faintly breaking through the perpetual fog when Ash woke up. His eyes burned and he struggled to keep them open, even as Misty shifted beside him. He went to sleep far too late, his mind running over a million different things, and it was far too early. Ash felt like he didn't even have the energy to roll over, let alone get up and get ready for the day. This was probably going to be his only chance to get an actual shower for a little while, but that involved an awful lot of effort.

Misty sat up beside him, yawning and stretching her arms out until there was a popping sound from her back. She sighed and then slumped over, her weight resting on him. "Ash? Time to get up."

"I'm awake," he grumbled, opening his eyes again and tilting his head around so that he could see her better.

"Sorry," Misty muttered, sitting up but keeping her hand on his arm. She really wished that she could let Ash sleep a little while longer. She wished that she could sleep a little more too. For the first time in a while, she slept peacefully, not at all on edge. She just enjoyed sleeping in a bed, taking comfort in the fact that she could hear her boyfriend breathing on the other side of the bed. Despite her peaceful sleep, it ended far too soon.

At least they wouldn't have to walk this time.

"I'm going to fight for the shower," Misty glanced over her shoulder at the door, still feeling too lethargic to move too much.

"You mean you're going to glare at anyone who tries to get in before you to scare them off?" Misty threw a pillow at his head, and Ash actually cracked a small smile.

He listened to her leave before he felt something else move. Glancing down, he watched as Pikachu curled up closer to him, settling in to sleep for just a little while longer. Ash was originally going to get up, but at the sight of his friend sleeping peacefully, he changed his mind. Ash hugged Pikachu close, letting his eyes close for a few more minutes.

...

Gary was making his way towards the kitchen when he heard it. He knew Leaf's scathing tone anywhere, yet it wasn't directed at him so that was new. Curiously, he made his way over to another room, peering inside. Immediately he sighed, leaning against the doorframe as he watched the scene before him unfold.

Leaf and Paul were standing on opposite sides of the table, a map in between them. Grey met brown as the two glared at one another fiercely. Gary didn't know what it was about them, but from the first time they spoke to one another, Leaf and Paul seemed to get under one another's skin.

"It doesn't make sense to go that way!" Paul growled at her. He jabbed his finger at the map. "The fastest route to the island is to go around there!"

"Newsflash, we need to make a stop there!" Leaf slammed her hand down on another spot.

"You're guessing one of your orbs are there! We know there's a prison over that way! We can go back to the stupid Flower Garden. Let's just go to the prison first!"

"You're coming along as an extra hand!" Leaf all but shouted at him. "That's it. Cynthia gave us permission to go! You don't get a say in anything."

"Food!" Gary walked into the room like he wasn't listening to them for a while. Paul closed his

mouth, any retort he was going to send to Leaf dying on his lips. He sent her one last furious glare before storming out of the room.

Leaf let out a sigh and slumped down some. Gary nudged her gently. "Hey, ignore him. If what Dawn said is true, he's just worried."

"I know. If the situation were different, I'd be all for going to the prison first but..." Leaf bit her lip, and it took Gary a moment to realize that she was fighting back tears. That stunned him more than her anger did.

"Leaf—."

"Cynthia said that because it was my intel that this is my mission," she interrupted him.

"Well technically Ash—."

"No." Once again she cut Gary off before he could finish his sentence. Leaf shook her head wildly. "I'm not doing that to him again. We would just be heading off to the Flower Garden if I hadn't overheard where the prison was. I...how many times have we just sat back and let him make these choices? Sweet, ridiculous, dorky, dense Ash Ketchum who's horrible at making big, long term plans and better at making it up on the fly. Who wears his goddamn heart on his sleeve and is one of the most emotional people I know." She slapped her hand on the table again. "We've been letting him pick whether we help one person or a lot of people and you think that's not ripping him apart? I heard him and Misty talking once and I just..." She shook her head. "We're saving the world before we're saving...tangible people. And it sucks. I get why Paul's mad, I do. But he just doesn't get it and that just...we do that to Ash too. This is just once and it sucks."

Gary didn't really know what to say as she stopped ranting. He hadn't thought about it that way before but it made a lot of sense. "Well...just...don't kill Paul, okay? We're going to try as hard as we can to make everything go right. That's all we can do."

"Yeah, I know it is." Leaf slumped against him. "And that really sucks too."

...

Cynthia stood in front of the ground, looking at each face in turn. Her stomach twisted painfully as she watched all of them. They were all so very young, and here she was sending them on this dangerous mission. A part of her wanted to change her mind, or send other people, but she trusted the legendary Pokémon. She knew that it had to be this way.

Leaf stood at the front of the group, and that surprised Cynthia a bit. She got the distinct impression that Ash was the leader of this rag-tag group, but he was hanging back with Misty and Pikachu, looking relieved to be back there.

A couple other people were standing away from them, watching and whispering.

"They're wondering why I'm giving newcomers a mission," Cynthia answered their unspoken question. She caught the way Serena, Clemont and May would glance back at everyone else from time to time. "They don't approve."

"What did you tell them?" Dawn asked her.

The Champion smiled slightly, "That I could vouch for all of you, even if I can't. That you were going on a scouting mission based on your own info." She didn't tell them about how a couple other people commented on the fact that it was better to let the new people go into a trap. That

made Cynthia cringe. Some people rose to the occasion in situations like this, others didn't.

May's face scrunched up with confusion. "They don't know anything else."

"They really don't need to know."

An almost bitter smile rose up on Leaf's lips. "You don't trust them."

Cynthia looked to the jeeps that were assigned to them. She mentally went over everything that she thought they'd need and if they packed it. "Trust is a luxury we can't afford unless we're a hundred percent positive about it all. Any bit of doubt is enough." She faced them again, putting her hands on her hips. "Over the past few years there's been an...eruption of activity with legendary Pokémon. The world is so imbalanced, it'd be foolish to overlook Arceus being a solution to this mess and that's exactly what a lot of people are doing. We've been ineffective at stopping the Teams to the point where it's pathetic. We're not the answer to this problem. I don't think we ever have been. This is beyond us."

They all stared at one another, not quite sure what to make of her mini-speech. Clemont looked up at her curiously, "Ash just told you everything last night though. How could you come to this conclusion so quickly?"

Cynthia smiled at him. "I already knew. I just needed the missing pieces to see the whole picture clearly." This was a topic she could talk about all day, but they all had things to do. Though she was sending this group ahead, she had to start preparing everyone else to follow, to make a more comprehensive plan. "Here's the deal. You're going to go down the route we discussed last night. You are not to deviate from this route unless it's an emergency. You are not to separate from one another." She paused, looking from one person to the next, all of them paying attention to her. "Fullmoon Island is a factor we're not sure about it. We had no idea that they set up on Newmoon Island and you heard nothing about Fullmoon. There's a possibility that it's being used too. If not, use it as a place to hide, heading out to scope out Newmoon Island for a while. If it is, observe there too but you'll have to go back and forth between the mainland. I won't lie to any of you, what I'm asking is going to be dangerous. If any of you want to stay here, you're completely welcome."

Leaf looked back towards Dawn and Paul. She didn't even bother checking to see the reactions of everyone else. They'd come too far together for anyone to be willing to back out now. People on the outside could tell them as many times as they wanted that they didn't have to go on the rest of this dangerous journey, but they were wrong.

It didn't seem like either of the Sinnoh natives were backing down either.

"Alright, you guys can leave when you're ready," Cynthia said. She turned around and walked away. There was so much to do, and a part of her felt if she didn't walk away right then and there, she'd want to stop them. A part of her felt like she was sending them on a suicide mission.

For all she knew, she was.

Back by the jeeps, Ash watched Misty, who was trying to help Clemont get his bags into the trunk so that they wouldn't get triggered by the off-road driving that they were going to be doing for the most part.

"Pikapi." He glanced over at Pikachu, who gave him a pointed look and nodded at Misty.

"Pikachupi pika pika pi pika."

"Yeah, I guess," Ash agreed before opening the door to the second jeep. "You can make yourself

comfy, I'll be back in a minute."

"Pika." Pikachu nodded his head affirmatively, hopping happily into the passenger seat.

Ash walked over, and Misty glanced up as he approached. Clemont looked back and smiled at her, nodding his head. Misty took that as a sign that he was going to be fine with his bags and that she could go. The redhead walked over, meeting Ash halfway.

"I don't want to see Shaymin," Ash admitted to Misty after a moment of silence, not really sure what he wanted to say to her.

She scowled fiercely. "You don't need to tell me twice, but that's probably where the orb is, right?"

"It feels right," he said after a moment of thought. He watched Misty yawn, and was unable to fight off his own. "Stop making me tired."

"If I'm suffering, you're suffering with me," she replied, leaning on him to keep herself up.

Ash was still for a moment before he pursed his lips. "I wish you were coming in our jeep."

"You know why I'm not." They had two drivers per vehicle just in case. Leaf was driving her, Paul and Clemont in the first car, her being the secondary driver, Clemont navigating, and Paul as a backup navigator since he knew Sinnoh. Likewise, Gary was driving the second vehicle, Ash (even though he didn't have an actual license) as his backup with Dawn as their navigator if they got split up. Serena and May would be with them as well.

"Well yeah, but who's going to save us if our jeep gets like...hijacked or something. The two kickass ones are in the same car? What am I supposed to do?" In Ash's mind, Misty and Leaf were forces of nature to be reckoned with and it wasn't fair to keep them together.

Misty's eyes opened and she snorted with amusement as she nudged him. "I don't know how you expect someone to hijack your car but if that happens, you use your Aura. You also have these things called your Pokémon who would risk life and limb for you"

"I guess." Ash glanced back at Pikachu, the thought of his Pokémon risking their lives for him making his stomach twist uncomfortably. That was why he chose to keep them in their Pokéballs more often than not. At least they were safe there.

He looked back, watching as Misty closed the hatch to the trunk. Leaf climbed into the driver's seat of the jeep, and he knew that it was time to go. There was really no point wasting anymore time.

Ash almost yelped as Misty suddenly spun around and hugged him tightly. He put his hands on her shoulders, brow furrowing as he felt panic pulse through her aura. "Mist?"

It took her a moment, but she looked up at him, cheeks red. "Sorry. Guess I'm just a bit anxious."

That confused him at first, but if he was honest, Ash was a bit apprehensive too. He just had no idea what was making him think that way. Something urged him to try and figure it out right then and there. "I...I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you've done. You just...I'd be even more of a demented mess than I am now."

"Probably." She laughed sharply. "What prompted that?" Not that she didn't appreciate him essentially thanking her, but there was really no need for it.

He shrugged his shoulders, an expression of pure confusion across his face. "I just..." A train flashed through his mind and suddenly things made sense. "None of us knew Drew was going to fall. We don't know what's going to happen now either. Just in case..." He shrugged again.

"You don't want to leave anything unsaid."

"I guess."

Misty contemplated that for a moment, knowing they only had another minute or so before needing to go their separate ways. It was completely melodramatic to think of, because they were just going into separate cars, but he was right. She wouldn't have considered it before, but after Drew's death, the reminder that anything could happen without warning was a painful one.

"Well, thank you for listening to my silly fears and rants, for just being there to be a shoulder to cry on or whatever I needed after my sisters...and also for not treating me like I'm going to break." Misty didn't like this. It felt like they were saying goodbye when that was far from the truth. She had to tell herself again that they were just going into other cars.

Misty kissed him, just a brief peck, and then leaned her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. A lot of people said that the sparks that came with kisses and touches were the best parts of a relationship but she disagreed. Those things did fade away, replaced by a warm, familiar comfort that she valued so much more.

Dawn watched them with interest, shifting Piplup in her arms. "They're clingier than they used to be." She could distinctly remember a time when Ash got embarrassed about holding Misty's hand in public. There was little doubt in her mind that May could too.

"This is new," Serena admitted. "They weren't like this before...well...before."

"Drew," May spoke up. "You can say his name. They weren't like this before Drew died. I guess it makes sense, right? Someone else's loss is a lesson for them."

"May..."

"I don't blame them. If I had the chance..." She shook her head and turned back, climbing into the back seat of the second jeep.

Dawn and Serena exchanged worried looks and Piplup tilted his head, not understanding why May was so sad. Serena smiled and walked around to the other side of the jeep then nodded at the other door. Dawn understood immediately and got in that side, shoving May over so the girl was sandwiched between the two of them.

...

Delia Ketchum heard the rumours, and she didn't like them one bit. That was why, despite the fact that she had only just been released from the hospital, she stormed down to the designated interrogation rooms. She was almost there when several people walked into view, and she came to a complete stop.

Though she was much older, there was absolutely no mistaking Madame Boss. She was just as poised and well dressed as the last time Delia had seen her, back when she had a different name and a different look. She heard the rumours that Lance was bringing in someone big to give them an edge over Giovanni, an informant, but never once had Delia expected this. She thought there'd be some of those old admins that they helped defeat, but not the woman that started this whole mess in the first place.

Delia Ketchum was a mild-mannered woman for the most part, but in that moment, her temper flared. Without any hesitation, she stormed after the group.

Lance caught sight of her before anyone else had. He ushered for the other guards to bring Sylvia into the interrogation room as he turned to address Delia. "I know this looks bad—."

"Looks bad?" Delia gaped at him. "You of all people have to remember what she did and you just brought her here."

"It was part of the deal. She's our best source to use against Giovanni now." Delia looked at him with confused eyes and Lance chuckled bitterly. "Her name is Sylvia Rocketti and he's her son. If we would have known who she was, we might have been able to stop him before he could start any of this."

"Well has she been useful yet?"

"Incredibly. Her intel led to our most successful strike on Team Rocket so far. She's not always as forthcoming as I'd like though."

Delia frowned before saying, "Let me talk to her. Bring Amanda here too." She looked at the door. "If you think for a minute she won't want the opportunity to try and dig into us, you're wrong."

That actually was a strategy that Lance had considered, but it was just an idea at the edge of his mind. The more he thought about it though, the more he liked it. "That might just work. Wait here, do not go in until I have Green and we make sure it's safe." He didn't wait for an answer, turning to walk down the hall.

Delia waited impatiently, itching to go into that room and confront the woman that did so much damage in the past. It felt like an eternity until she heard rapid footsteps coming down the hall, turning around to see a rather furious Amanda Green storming after Lance.

"Is she really in there?" Amanda asked through gritted teeth, eyes darting to the door.

"I saw her myself."

"Let's get some answers then." Amanda wasted no time in walking to the room, thrusting the door open dramatically, the guards in the room had Sylvia's wrist chained to the table, though she was so old and frail looking that it probably wouldn't have mattered.

Recognition instantly rushed over the old woman's features before a slight smirk rose up on her lips. "Green. It has been a long time, hasn't it? And who is...?" She trailed off as she looked at Delia, eyeing her for a moment. "Could you be... Yellow?" Delia said nothing, but her glare was enough. "Will Blue be joining us later?"

"Blue's dead, and I can't believe you're still alive," Amanda replied pointedly.

"Dead? Oh, well that's too bad. He was much wittier than the rest of you. Tell me, how did he die?"

"An accident." Her words were angry and straight to the point. "We're not here to answer your questions."

"Accident?" Sylvia completely ignored her second statement. "Oh I highly doubt that. Not with that much anger. Tell me, did you do it?" Her smirk broadened as Amanda scowled.

"He was killed," Delia said suddenly, startling everyone. "He was killed and so was his wife and his sister but on any document you find it'll say it was a car accident." She paused. "Your turn, tell us something useful."

Lance moved around the table, opening a folder and spreading papers out in front of Sylvia. "Your son has been very busy."

The old woman turned her attention away from Delia and Amanda, instead looking at the information that she provided him. Her eyes slowly scanned over the images and the documents, though she remained as poised and proper as she always had been. "Goodness, my idiotic son certainly did make a mess."

"You're not going to gush about what a great job he's doing?" Amanda shot at her.

"Oh, I am quite proud that he usurped power from you," Sylvia said, not seeing a reason to deny such a thing. "Or I would be, if he had."

"That's right," Lance agreed. "We haven't lost yet."

"Yes, you have." She shook her head. "I'd be proud, if this was purely my son's doings. Oh I have no doubt he has a very large hand in this, but this..." Once again, the old woman shook her head. "What I see is something similar to a chessboard but not exactly. This situation is something else all together but I think that's as close an analogy as we'll get. Every one of us are pawns, even me. Even you."

"Your analogy isn't anything new. We do have some of the most strategically-inclined minds in the world here," Lance informed her.

She ignored him. "I'd dare to say that the kings are my son and Red. Though that's what differentiates this from chess. You've lost your king already. He's surrounded with no one to protect him and unable to check anyone on his own."

"So why haven't we lost yet then?" Delia asked her.

"As I said, this game is different. Your queens are hidden from sight. The most powerful players are still active, but they're missing in this picture." She motioned to the files. "There is something that no one is seeing, not even me. There's a bigger game going on here. There are too many missing pieces to this puzzle. That isn't even the biggest problem that you're overlooking though."

Delia, Amanda and Lance all exchanged almost tired looks.

"Alright, what is the biggest problem?" Delia asked her tiredly.

"Why, dear sweet Yellow, the answer to that is simple. If we're all the chess pieces, including my son, then who are the ones playing the game in the first place?"

...

There was nothing like the feel of the warm sun combined with a refreshing breeze that smelled of the ocean. It was something that Misty had always loved to the point where she thought about moving away from Cerulean City when she was older just to find a place like that.

Laughter distracted her from the clear ocean. Looking over her shoulder, Misty smiled broadly as she watched Tracey try to keep his sketchbook up in the air, away from grabby little hands. A boy with blonde hair darted around him, whining and tugging at his shirt. Daisy laughed loudly at

their antics, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

Violet wasn't far from her, animatedly talking to a small boy with blue hair. Just a few feet from them, Lily sat with a pink-haired boy, who was napping with his head on her lap.

They were all so happy, so vibrant and alive.

"Mommy!" Something in Misty made her instinctively turn around, though she didn't quite know why. A moment later, a small girl with black hair hauled up into a short ponytail practically attacked her legs. She smiled broadly, sea-green eyes glinting happily. "Daddy said if I'm good I can get ice cream later!"

"Did he now?" Misty asked, completely amused. "Well, I guess you have to be good, don't you?"

That was when everything stopped. The breeze vanished, the smell no longer lingered, and the laughter was gone. A third time, Misty looked around, staring at everyone who was frozen mid-action.

"Right," she muttered. "This isn't real."

"It could be, or something like it at least." The unfamiliar voice startled Misty as a teenager walked up to her side. It took the red-head a moment to realize that this girl was the same as the little one that ran up to her earlier, but her expression was wary and grim.

"Who are you?"

"No one yet. Maybe no one ever. I don't know. That's up to you." The girl peered at her. "Something like this could be real, if you want it to be."

"Of course I do!" The prospect that she wouldn't want bright, happy moments like this was almost insulting to her.

"Guess you gotta work for it then."

"What's your name?" Misty asked the teenager suddenly, fairly certain that she knew who this girl was supposed to be.

"That's up to you too."

Without warning, Misty was jerked out of her dream, her stomach twisting uncomfortably as they went over a huge bump and Leaf cursed loudly. She blinked, looking out the window at the unfamiliar terrain. "How long was I asleep?"

"A while," Clemont answered from the back. They went over another bump, and his glasses almost went flying. He looked wary, and that instantly put Misty on guard.

"I don't see why we need to stop in that flower garden right now. It'd be a lot faster to go the other way," Paul said from his spot beside Clemont. Misty quickly realized that she woke up in the middle of a conversation, nay, an argument.

"Are you trying to be obtuse?" Leaf asked, gritting her teeth together as she focused on the road. "Cynthia trusts that we're doing the right thing. You saw the stupid orbs. You know this is legit."

"I never said that we could never go but it would have made more sense to go to the prison first and help the people!"

Leaf looked about ready to let go of the wheel and leap into the backseat. Misty had no idea what she missed, but she really didn't want to listen to this argument. She twisted around in her seat to look behind her at Paul. "Look, I get it. Dawn said your brother's there, right? We're going to do our best but this is important. It's okay to be scared."

Paul looked at her fiercely. "I am not scared and you don't get it! How could you?"

"Guys?" Clemont spoke up hesitantly but everyone ignored him.

Instantly, her want to stifle the argument was gone. Instead, she felt anger boil up in her. "My sisters are dead because of Giovanni! He chose to destroy MY entire city because I fought back against him when I didn't even know what was going on. So I know what it's like thinking your actions are going to hurt someone and wanting to do something about it!" It was only slight, but Misty was sure that she saw Paul shrink back a bit.

"Guys?"

Paul muttered something under his breath, it probably wasn't even anything bad, but it was still enough to make Leaf lose it.

"Misty hold the wheel!" Leaf let go and twisted around in her seat. Misty grabbed the wheel, alarmed and not used to controlling a vehicle from that side. "You don't have to be such an asshole!"

"We need to take that right turn!" Clemont yelled over them. Misty instinctively jerked the steering wheel, causing the jeep to jerk violently. Leaf twisted back around just in time to grab the wheel and actually get them around the corner. A shrill scream escaped her lips as she almost slammed into a massive boulder, swerving at the last second to avoid it. The brakes squealed loudly from the friction and they came to a jerking stop.

Everyone was silent for a moment before Leaf muttered. "Arceus, Clemont. Warn me about that next time!" She looked out the window. "I thought we were really close to the Flower Garden? Not a rock field."

Clemont looked down at the screen of his GPS and then looked outside again. "With the coordinates you gave me, this should be the Flower Garden."

The four of them looked out the window at the dead and barren landscape. Whatever might have grown there at one point in time, it was all dead now.

...

Ash grimaced as blinding light suddenly assaulted his eyes. He put his arm up in an attempt to block the light while still trying to see where he was.

Something moved in front of him, blocking the light, and Ash could finally look up. He flinched back, surprised to see Arceus looming over him.

"Arceus?" He muttered.

"Time is running out," Arceus said, and Ash shivered. He'd never get over how the creature's voice seemed to echo from all directions, neither male nor female, just raw power. It was hard to explain.

"We're going as fast as we can," Ash replied once the words settled in. "It's not exact easy to go from one region to another when they're all blocked off and we're wanted." A bit of resentment

rushed through him. "We could use some help too."

"The deaths of Kyogre and Groudon, amongst others, have already harmed the world greatly. We work hard to keep the balance intact. Would you have me throw others to be slaughtered?"

The confirmation that others outside of Kyogre and Groudon had died made Ash's stomach twist painfully. He knew that Arceus had a point, that sending more legendaries might cause more harm than good, but it was still frustrating. "We're going as fast as we can."

"Not quite."

Ash thought about the fact that they were also planning on taking on the prison, and realized that Arceus was probably talking about things like that. The thought of not helping made him feel even worse. "We need to help." His words came out as almost a whisper.

"Help who you will, but there is little time left before the end."

"The end," Ash repeated. "What is the end?"

"You have already figured it out."

"You can't stop them now? I know Mirage Pokémon are usually stronger but you could probably beat a fake Arceus."

"The meddlers don't understand what they are creating. I may not survive. However, it's not the creation that is the true problem, it's gaining the strength to fix what they already broke." Arceus vanished, and once again Ash was blinded by light.

Ash's eyes snapped open, only to see a metallic thing hanging in front of him. He jerked back in surprise, and laughter bubbled up from behind him. Blinking with confusion, Ash first looked down at Pikachu, who just stared back with amusement. He then looked as Dawn sat back in her seat properly, the granola bar she used to startle him in hand, Piplup sitting on May's lap. He had no idea what was going on, but both Serena and May were laughing along with her. Seeing a smile on May's face was enough.

"You were muttering to yourself," Gary said when the laughter died down. He glanced over at Ash quickly, a teasing smirk on his face. "Couldn't quite hear what it was. Was it a good dream? About a certain redhead?"

"What?" Ash stared at him blankly. "Why would I..."

"Hey," Gary waved his hand, "nothing to be ashamed of! She's hot and wears a lot of swimsuits so it's easy to picture.

His blank stare turned into a horrified one. "What?" Even Pikachu shot Gary a dark look.

Serena clicked her tongue. "Now Gary, Leaf wouldn't like you talking about that. Would she?"

Gary's smirk instantly vanished and he glanced up at the rearview mirror. "Why would Leaf matter?"

"Please," the blonde waved her hand and leaned back in the seat, May and Dawn watching on with amusement. "She told me about how you guys made out."

"Pika?"

"What?" Ash repeated for a third time and the two exchanged incredulous looks.

For a moment, everyone waited in silence to see Gary's reaction. The brunet just ended up shrugging his shoulders. "Guess we did."

So many questions ran through Ash's mind. He really didn't know what to make of this because the last time he'd been alone with Gary and Leaf they had still been at each other's throats. Deciding that it was just going to hurt him to think about that, he scratched Pikachu's ears and looked out the window. "Where are we?"

"You've been asleep for quite a while," May told him, leaning forwards a bit. "You must have been really tired."

"I...don't think that's it," Ash replied unsurely, looking down towards Pikachu as if the small Pokémon could help him focus. "I think I was talking to Arceus. The second he was done, I woke up."

Everyone fell silent before four voices blended together in the same question he had asked so many times already. "What?"

"What did he say?" Dawn added eagerly. She moved so that she was peering over his seat.

"Buckle up," Ash told her offhandedly and she made a face at him but did what he said. "He said... he said we're running out of time. Whatever Team Rocket's doing, it's almost to where Arceus might not be able to fix it."

Gary snorted, his brow furrowing as his knuckles tightened on the steering wheel. "If he wants us to go faster he's going to have to help us more."

"I said that to him." Ash shook his head. "He basically said that the legendaries are either using their powers to keep everything in balance, which probably means protecting the orbs too, or just staying out of the way so they don't add to the problem. More than just Kyogre and Groudon are dead."

"So what are we supposed to do? We're only human. Well, most of us. Sometimes I wonder if you count at all." Instantly, Dawn, May and Serena all hit him. "Ow! What?"

Ash didn't say anything, looking out the front window, his lips pursing as he pulled Pikachu a bit closer. The Pokémon shot Gary an unimpressed look.

"I—shit." He realized exactly what he had said. Gary could have chalked it up to being tired from driving so long (while Ash slept through it all), but it was still a nasty thing to say. "I didn't mean it like that. I swear. I just—what the hell?"

Ash grabbed Pikachu and Dawn grabbed Piplup to stop the Pokémon from flying as Gary suddenly hit the brakes. In front of them, the other jeep jerked, took a sharp turn that they almost missed. Serena, May and Dawn all screamed as they skidded to a stop. Breathing heavily, they all looked over, a second series of screams and gasp escaping everyone when the other jeep just managed to swerve out of the way of a giant boulder.

There was a pause before Gary drove the jeep towards the other one, putting it in park and turning it off before kicking open his door. Everyone else quickly followed suit, piling out of the car as quickly as they could. "What the hell was that?"

"Sorry!" Leaf replied as she got out of the driver's seat. "Things got a little...heated and we almost

missed the turn and then this giant boulder appeared out of nowhere."

Ash made his way to Misty and Pikachu jumped into her arms. Ash put his arm on her shoulder and she just smiled sheepishly. That was when he knew. "What did you do?"

"Leaf and I argued with Paul." She sounded like a small child guilty of stealing cookies. Ash just shook his head, a bit of amusement crossing his features.

Dawn leaned forward to look at Paul, tilting her head. "What were you arguing over?"

"Doesn't matter," he replied, grey eyes staring at the area around them. "What happened here?"

Dawn looked around too, not understanding why he was questioning this place.

"Are you alright?" Serena asked Clemont, eyeing him to check for any injuries.

"Yeah, I'm fine, but..." He looked around the desolate area. "Serena, this is supposed to be the Flower Garden."

That made all of the arguments that were threatening to break out instantly vanish. Gary, Dawn, May and Serena all looked at the surrounding area in varying degrees of horror while Ash just closed his eyes.

"Oh Mew," Dawn whispered, her blue eyes widening with horror. "This place was so beautiful before. Do you guys think that maybe...Shaymin...?" She trailed off, not wanting to say what was on her mind.

Ash moved suddenly, walking ahead of them all and swiftly making his way down the hills. He ignored everyone calling after him, even Misty and Pikachu. The dried, dead flowers crunched under his feet, the dust rising up with every step he took towards the nearby mountains. Once he was close enough, he stopped and just stared.

"Ash?" Misty called out as they approached. "What are—?"

"Stay there!" Ash called out to her suddenly, the alarm in his voice instantly stopping her. He turned away from his friends, eyes narrowing as he stared at the small cave. "I know you're in there."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming." Though it had been over three years, Ash instantly recognized the voice, his fist curling into a fist as Shaymin appeared. She leisurely stretched out before eyeing him. "Took you long enough. I've been hiding and waiting for you to show up for forever!"

"Is that...Shaymin talking?" Paul muttered quietly to Dawn.

"Yeah, it's just better to nod your head and go along with it when this happens," she whispered back. Paul quickly looked around at everyone else, realizing that absolutely no one seemed surprised to see a talking legendary Pokémon.

"She's cute," Serena said, clasping her hands together.

"Yeah," Clemont agreed, "but Ash looks like he wants to kick her."

"She poisoned and nearly killed Misty the last time we saw her," Leaf informed them in an off-handed way. That shocked both of them, but the brunette wasn't paying attention to see their reactions. She kept her eyes focused on Shaymin instead.

"What happened here?" Ash asked Shaymin. "And please tell me that the orb is here."

"Well..." Shaymin trailed off dramatically, earning a glare. "Calm down cranky. Yes I'm babysitting a silly orb for you. It's this way, come on."

For a moment, Misty honestly thought that Shaymin was going to leap onto Ash's head instead, but a quick glare from the trainer must have changed the Pokémon's mind because she started walking.

"Pikachupi," Pikachu muttered to her, his ears slumping slightly. "Pikapi pi pika pikachu."

Misty couldn't understand him, but somehow she still got the gist of what he wanted. "Don't worry, we'll make sure Ash calms down."

"That nasty new Darkrai showed up here," Shaymin said as she led the group across the dry land. "He tried to get rid of me but I hid and he couldn't find me. He hurt this garden a lot though." She looked at the ground and sighed. "Nothing's going to grow here again. I can feel it."

"Can't you make something grow here?"

"You can fix things if there's some life left in them, but not if it's completely gone," Shaymin explained sadly. "It's gone from here, you must be able to feel it." That remark was shot towards Ash.

He didn't answer, brown eyes looking around the landscape. It was true, this place felt so dead that it was almost eerie. "How did Darkrai do this?"

"He used attacks the real Darkrai can't and, it almost looked like he was using something like Aura too." Ash looked at Shaymin with alarm. "What? I know what that thing is. If some psycho can give it any powers, why not ones like yours?"

That had honestly never occurred to him before, but dread suddenly welled up within Ash. He knew for a fact that Riley had died at the hands of Team Rocket, but if someone like Doctor Young got the chance to experiment on him for his Aura before that happened, who knew what the end result would have been.

"Is that...Zero's ship?" Dawn asked as they drew closer to an object that really didn't fit everything else around them.

"Yup," Shaymin answered, sitting on the ground. "And it crushed my shrine."

"Are you implying that the orb is underneath all of that?" Gary asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No, I'm telling you it's under it all, you need to listen better," she scoffed at Gary. "I told you where it was, you should be grateful. Others wouldn't." She sat down.

"You're not going to help us get it out?" May asked the Pokémon.

"Uh, no, cranky over there is the only one that can." Shaymin nodded towards Ash.

Everyone groaned but Paul just regarded them oddly. "I don't see the big deal. We just use our Pokémon to move everything, Ash crawls in, grabs it, and we go." He really didn't want them to waste much more time there.

"That...could actually work," Leaf agreed after a bit of thought. "You good with it Ash?"

"Just don't drop anything on me." Everyone start releasing their stronger Pokémon.

"Hey, Dawn." The girl looked down as Shaymin approached just after Dawn released Mamoswine. "I was wondering if you could do me a favour."

"What kind of favour?" Dawn asked. She took a step back where small spots on Shaymin started to glow, what looked like small seeds appearing and falling to the ground. She eyed it all warily before looking at the Pokémon. "What are those?"

"They're Gracedia seeds," Shaymin explained. "When you leave, I have to go to the safe place in case fake Darkrai comes back so I can't put these anywhere else. I was wondering, when you get the chance, if you could just...toss them in the wind. They'll go to wherever they need to be."

Dawn knelt down, scooping the seeds into her hand, though she was wary, she also chose to believe that Shaymin was telling her the truth. "What will...will these make a new Flower Garden?"

"Yes, and I'm entrusting it to you so don't lose them."

"Piplup," Dawn spoke to the Pokémon that was balancing on her shoulder again. "Get a small, plastic bag for me?" He nodded and dug through her bag, handing her a baggie a moment later. "Thank you." She poured the seeds instead. "I promise, Shaymin, I'll get them somewhere safe."

"Good," Shaymin replied happily, turning her attention to everyone else. The Pokémon snorted with amusement, because they all looked ridiculous. Torterra, Ria, Mamoswine, Gyarados, Nidoking, Venusaur, Luxray, Blaziken, and Delphox looked like a strange puzzle, holding up the pieces that they couldn't actually move without collapsing everything. Ash had already crawled into the small opening that they made, and now they were just focusing on not crushing him.

"You okay?" Misty called out to him, kneeling down beside the entrance. Pikachu was beside her, having stayed outside on Ash's orders.

"Yeah I—ow! I'm good!" There were a few more moments of struggling until they heard him cry out in victory. Soon, Ash appeared again, awkwardly scooting his way out, since he couldn't maneuver himself around any other way. As soon as he got close, Misty grabbed his feet, tugging him out the rest of the way.

Ash yelped at her sudden action, glaring over his shoulder at her. "Warn me next time." He waved his hands in the air, a bright purple orb glowing in one of them.

"You're welcome," she replied dryly. The ground shook under their feet as the Pokémon let the debris fall once everyone was clear of it.

"You need to learn to be more grateful," Shaymin piped up as she scurried over.

The reaction was almost instantaneous, with Ash leaping to his feet and getting between Misty and the Pokémon, a harsh glare on his face. Misty, for her part, was completely stunned by his overprotective action, not remembering a time when he had done something as forceful as push her back away from a threat like that. If she didn't remember the damage Shaymin could cause, she would have been both insulted and amused.

Misty grabbed the back of his shirt and tugged a bit. "It's okay. She's not going to do anything again."

"Couldn't even if I wanted to, you're immune to my poisons now," Shaymin said offhandedly. "It's a one-time deal because most times it's only used when we want to completely get rid of someone. You get cured by the Gracideas, you get immune." She sadly looked around. "Not that there's any

Gracideas left."

"There will be," Dawn assured her.

"And for that, I'm grateful." Shaymin nodded and then looked at everyone else on the ground. "So there was a clue on that shrine about where to go next but I can't remember what it is. Just keep doing what you're doing I guess. You'll find where you need to be. For now, I'm going to the safe place."

"Safe place?" May repeated.

"A place where legendary Pokémon can go so we don't end up like some of the others," Shaymin explained as she started walking by them. "Just watch out for the fake Darkrai, okay? He's a nasty thing, just like that person that's supposed to be controlling him." She continued to scurry away.

Everyone watched the Pokémon leave, except for Paul, who turned his attention to the orb in Ash's hand. "Are they always this easy to get?"

"Not even close," Ash admitted, turning around to look at Paul. "I guess we're heading to Newmoon Island next."

Paul met his eyes and nodded his head. "Good."

Dawn watched them all for a moment. A breeze blew her hair in her face, and she glanced down at the seeds that she was still carrying. A part of her was tempted to let them fly then and there, but she realized that Shaymin could have done the same thing. No, she needed to wait.

After all, there was a time and place for everything.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

The Island of Nightmares

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Paul was never one who enjoyed the sights and smells of the beach or the ocean all that much. There was never a particular reason, he wasn't afraid of water or the creatures that lurked beneath. There was just nothing appealing about the atmosphere to him.

In that moment, the ocean was almost a paradox to him. It signaled the fact that he was so very close to where his brother was supposed to be, yet at the same time it was the biggest hindrance to achieving his goals. There was no way they could fly over to the island, though swimming there was just as risky. It was only when they were at the ocean's edge that they realized just how difficult their predicament was.

The sound of footsteps crunching over rock caught Paul's attention. He looked over his shoulder slightly, watching Dawn carefully make her way over the pebble-covered coast. It mildly surprised him that Piplup wasn't in her arms, but Paul chose to ignore it, turning his attention back to the horizon.

"We're mostly going to be going on Misty's Gyarados," Dawn explained. "Though Gary's Blastoise is going to carry him and Leaf, and Misty does have more Pokémon if Gyarados struggles a bit with the weight."

"Alright."

They stood in silence for a moment, Dawn shifting slightly. Out of the corner of his eye, Paul watched her open and close her mouth, like she was struggling with what she wanted to say. He waited for a moment to see if she'd get anything out. When nothing came, he rolled his eyes. "What?"

Dawn jumped, a bit startled, but she recovered quickly. "I just...are you okay? You've been pretty quiet."

Paul looked over at her once again, not quite sure what to make of this girl. Some days she really seemed to be a lot older than she actually was. "I will be." His grey eyes locked onto the water again.

Dawn tilted her head slightly. "Alright, but you know you can talk to me, right?"

"I'm supposed to go to a thirteen-year-old for advice?"

She glared at him. "Just because I'm younger doesn't mean I can't help!" Her eyes turned to the ocean. "My mom might be there too, you know. I don't know where she is or what happened to her." Dawn crossed her arms in front of her, tilting her head down slightly. "I have to believe that she's okay though. I have to. Nothing's going to change my mind on that. Focus on something good rather than worrying about everything. My mom, so many of the other people I know, Ritchie... and Reggie too." She looked back at him, blinking away the tears that threatened to well up in her eyes. "So be positive or try to. If you can't...well...I guess I'll have to do it for you then."

Paul regarded her, appearing almost amused. "Still going with 'no need to worry', huh?"

Dawn tilted her head slightly. "How do you know about that?"

"Just because I don't say much, doesn't mean I don't notice things." Paul looked at something over her shoulder. "There's a problem, isn't there?"

Ash came to a stop beside Dawn, tilting his head slightly. "How'd you—?"

"You would have been bouncing to go already if there wasn't," Paul noted. There was really no question about it, he knew exactly what Ash would have done. The boy in question slowly nodded his head, and the three of them started walking back to the rest of the group.

They had a paper map stretched out on the ground, Gary and Leaf kneeling on either side of it to keep it flat. Clemont knelt adjacent to both of them, a digital map up on the tablet in his hands.

Clemont looked up as they approached and said, "Looks like there is a storm coming in tonight."

"We should be able to get to Fullmoon Island before then though," Leaf added quickly, tapping her finger on the map.

"And hope that there's no one there." Misty crossed her arms in front of her, scowling fiercely. "We might not be able to get back here in time if there is."

"So it comes down to going today, or waiting until the storm's over," Gary concluded.

Paul had to admit, it was a pretty valid problem, not some little frivolity like he was originally expecting. It was still frustrating to come so close but get set back over something that they couldn't control.

"What if we use the storm?" Everyone looked up at May, who was staring out over the water.

"Use the storm?" Serena asked her curiously.

"Yeah," May nodded her head, looking back at them. "The ocean will be choppy anyway, and rain makes it harder for everyone to see. We can scope Newmoon Island out without them knowing we're anywhere near there."

"That's insane," Leaf replied bluntly. "We could drown. Gyarados can't watch us all."

"So only a few of us go," Gary interjected, startling her a bit. "Misty can take Gyarados, I'll take Blastoise, and we'll bring Ash with us. The rest of you don't have water Pokémon strong enough to get through a storm like the one Clemont says is coming. The three of us will go ahead, get the

layout on everything. Misty can circle the island on Gyarados to get the parameter view, while Ash and I sneak onto the island. I'll get some shots and videos of it, while Ash does his Aura thing. Then we scam."

"There are a lot of dangerous variables in that," Clemont said, pushing his glasses up his nose slightly.

"There's going to be dangerous variables no matter when we go," Misty said, sighing a bit and straightening her shoulders. "Gary and May are right, this is probably the best time to go over."

"You too?" Leaf groaned, tugging at the strands of hair that framed her face. "You guys know I'm all for a crazy idea, but this is—you haven't said anything!" She stop midsentence and stood up, pointing at Ash. "What do you think?"

Ash looked around uncertainly, making sure to look at every single person at least once. Misty and Gary both felt so confident in the idea, as did May, but everyone else was unsure. It surprised him when he felt Paul's worry, though it was obvious that he was trying to hide it, maybe even from himself. Ash looked over at where Pikachu and Piplup were talking with one another, completely distracted from the rest of the group. "I think...it's the best we've got."

"There's a lot of that around here, isn't there?" Paul asked dryly.

"Not gonna ask why you're not coming?" Ash asked him in the same tone.

"We both know you'd never say yes to that, and I'm not stupid enough to drown myself out of stubbornness," Paul replied. "I don't want to go on any recon mission anyway. I want to get in there and take it out."

"First we have to get to Fullmoon Island," Serena pointed out. "Maybe we should just try that first and see how it goes. See if we can even get on the island at all."

"She's got a pretty valid point," Dawn agreed, piping up for the first time since the conversation began. "No point arguing if we can't even get there, right?"

They all had to admit that both girls were right. Looking back at the ocean, May asked, "Who's ready for another cold swim?"

....

The water wasn't quite as cold as they expected, but that didn't mean the trip was pleasant. The ocean became rough as the wind picked up, the storm coming closer and closer to them.

Everyone but Gary and Leaf were on Gyarados. Though some of the smaller Pokémon, including Starmie and Greninja, probably could have got them across the water with no problems, but they all agreed that being out of the water was probably their best option at this point.

None of them knew what was waiting for them at Fullmoon Island, even as it appeared in the distance.

"It doesn't look like there's any buildings on it!" Leaf called out to them.

"Doesn't mean that they're not camping on there," Paul pointed out.

Leaf wanted to argue, but she knew that he was right. Her attention shifted to Ash as he suddenly sat up straight and narrowed his eyes at the shore. "What is it boy? What did you see?"

Ash cast her an annoyed look, recognizing the line from the show they watched as kids about a pet Growlithe that always saved his young trainer. "Funny." He shook his head and looked at it. "There's something around the island."

"Around it?" Dawn asked as she leaned forward to get a better look. Piplup's tiny wings wheeled wildly as he started to tip off of Gyarados' back, and she lunged forward to grab him.

"Yeah, it's...not Aura, but it's...something. I dunno. That weird energy with Mirage Pokémon is orange. Aura is kind of blue or green, but this is almost...pink?"

"Psychic then," Clemont informed them. "Psychic users have said that it tends to appear as a dark pink colour more than anything else. That's why they use that for the classification system."

"That makes sense then," Gary added as they drew closer to the island. "Isn't this supposed to be Cresselia's island?"

"Yeah," Ash breathed out. Cresselia was a psychic-type, and if something bad happened on Newmoon Island, it was a safe bet that she'd try to protect her island somehow. "We're going to go through the barrier in a minute."

"Or bounce right off it," Misty mumbled. May and Serena were the only ones close enough to hear it, and exchanged worried expressions before bracing themselves.

Though they couldn't see the energy like Ash could, they all felt something strange pass over them as they went through the barrier.

"Well, we didn't crash into it," May supplied helpfully, even as she shivered from the energy.

"Bonus," Misty agreed. They all looked towards Ash, who once again sat up ramrod straight. "What now?"

"There's an orb on that island," he breathed out. It was the last thing he was expecting, and Ash could feel excitement rising up in him. The part that had been so conflicted about what Arceus told him, about leaving the other problems and focusing on his quest weighed down on him, and now he felt a lot lighter. By trudging forward, they were not only going to try and actually help people, but it led them to where they needed to be.

"You're kidding me, right?" Serena asked as she scooted forward a bit. "There just happens to be one here?"

Gary snorted. "If any of you try to argue with me about being herded anymore I get to say you're clinically insane." The odds of them consistently ending up where they needed to be by coincidence was just too low.

"How about something helpful?" Paul asked. "Like if there are people over there?" Though a bit stunned over Ash's abilities, and slightly skeptical over the range of them, he was quick to adjust, incorporating that into future strategies. He wasn't about to let something so useful go to waste.

Ash closed his eyes, trying to reach out to see if he could feel anyone. It was hard from the rough water and harder to see beyond all of the lush vegetation. There was something on that island, but it wasn't human. "No. But I think Cresselia's there."

"Let's hope this is a Regirock scenario, not a Registeel one," May added, crossing her fingers.

"Regirock and Registeel?" Dawn asked, looking back at Clemont. He just shook his head.

Ash thought about that for a moment, pressing his lips together. Pikachu shifted on his lap, and he looked down at the Pokémon. No one quite understood what he meant about how he could communicate with his Pokémon without actually talking to them in their minds like a psychic could, but no one needed to understand. It didn't change the fact that he knew that Pikachu knew what he wanted to do.

Gyarados and Blastoise reached the beach, but before anyone could get off, Ash stopped them. "Wait a sec. May's right, we don't know what's going to happen here. Let me go ahead and see what Cresselia's going to do."

"On your own?" Leaf asked him skeptically.

"I'm not going to do anything stupid – this time. I'm just going to see what Cresselia's doing, that's all. I'll be back in a minute. I have Pikachu with me."

"Pi pika!" Pikachu cried out, giving them a thumbs up.

"Five minutes," Misty said sternly. "This island isn't that big and you know where you're going. If you're not back in five, we follow you."

"Fifteen," Ash countered.

"Ten."

"Fine, ten," he conceded. Ash fixed the cap on his head and flashed his girlfriend a smile. "It'll be fine! Right Dawn? No need to worry?" The second part was directed to the girl sitting in the middle of Gyarados' back.

"That's when I worry the most," she replied dryly.

Ash blinked and then chuckled, waving as he turned to run, Pikachu gripping his hat to keep his balance.

"He's going to walk off a cliff or something, isn't he?" Serena asked as they watched him head towards the tree line.

Ash never even got to the trees though. He skidded to a stop as Cresselia appeared in front of him. He blinked at the Pokémon, a bit stunned at the Pokémon's sudden appearance. He had been keeping an 'eye' on her with his aura, but a part of him forgot the small tidbit that sometimes psychic Pokémon to teleport.

Sensing something was useless when they could appear right in front of you. It did let him know that Cresselia didn't mean any harm, though his friends didn't know that and he never got the chance to tell them.

Cresselia flew around him once and touched him with the tip of her beak. Then, along with Pikachu, they vanished.

...

Teleporting was a strange thing. It was like passing out for a moment without even passing out, and then appearing somewhere else. It also completely threw Ash's Aura out of balance. He could feel it rushing around him wildly, and as he steadied himself on his feet, he had to calm his Aura too.

Once he was steady, Ash looked around at where the Pokémon had taken him. He could feel the

energy from the Psychic Orb pulsing very close by, but from the looks of it, they were still on the coast of the island. Maybe the other side. He was expecting the shrine to be in the middle.

"That would have been too obvious," Cresselia's gentle voice chided him in his mind. Gone were the days when Ash grew surprised at Pokémon using telepathy, especially legendaries. What did surprise him was how comforting and soothing her voice was.

Pikachu sniffed the air and cringed on Ash's shoulder. The whine that escaped the Pokémon's lips made the hair stand up on Ash's arms. "What's wrong?"

"I wanted to show you," Cresselia said. **"I wanted you to see and to know."**

"Know what?" She didn't answer, just nodded her head as some rocks shifted, revealing a path to the shore. Ash looked back and the Pokémon just stared at him. There was no question about it, she wanted him to go down there.

Slowly, Ash proceeded forward. Nothing felt strange to him at all. There was absolutely nothing there that should have gotten that reaction from Pikachu. Still, the Pokémon was quivering, unmistakably unsettled, so Ash took Pikachu into his arms and held him close as he walked.

Then the smell hit him. Ash's stomach twisted and it took everything in him not to vomit. He suddenly didn't want to keep walking forward as dread welled up within him. He had a responsibility though. He promised his friends that he was going to make sure the island was safe. Well, technically it was to see if Cresselia was going to be hostile, but it was still the same thing in his mind.

His feet slipped on the rocks under him, and Ash slammed into the ground painfully, skidding the rest of the way down the hill. He groaned for a minute as Pikachu gently patted his face. "Yeah, I'm—." He couldn't keep talking. The smell was so potent that it actually made him heave a bit. Ash sat up quickly, ignoring his scraped arms and jerked back.

He scrambled onto his feet and away from the lifeless eyes that stared at him. His eyes darted across what was once a beach, but was now a graveyard with no graves, a dumping ground for the deceased.

Pikachu cried out in terror and sadness and Ash ran. His legs burned as he ran back up the hill, using his Aura to push him up faster than normal. He had to get away from there. Getting back to the top of the hill, Ash had to let Pikachu go as he lurched forward, unable to hold back his nausea.

He coughed and spluttered and Pikachu patted his arm gently. It took Ash a moment to be able to sit up straight, and when he did he had to wipe away the tears from his eyes. A shadow loomed over them, but he didn't look up. "Why did you want me to see that?"

"To warn you," Cresselia said simply. **"Come, your friends are frantic."**

"Warn me?" Ash asked, standing up and glaring at the Pokémon. "Warn me about what? That you're hoarding dead bodies back there?" He felt sick again as the image flashed before his eyes. It was one he'd never forget.

"The current brings some, I save the others. Better to honour them than let them be lost to the sea. I pray over each and every one of them," she reasoned, turning and floating back towards the way she had come. Ash fathered Pikachu into his arms and followed her.

"I don't...understand."

"Your thoughts are loud, unprotected against anyone with psychic powers," Cresselia warned him. "I knew what you wanted before you were even here, it is why I let you and your friends through my barrier that protects this island. Anyone else sees nothing. What you saw is the result of what's being done on the other island."

"Newmoon Island? I thought...it's just a prison, right?" Ash asked, his voice shaking.

"A prison? Hardly. You will see for yourselves when you and your friends go." Cresselia nodded her head. "I will give you permission to use my island as a safe haven for both your group and those coming to stop the madness over there. Though it is but a temporary solution. You may take the orb for the permanent one." She paused. "There is one thing I ask of you though, Chosen One."

"What's that?" Ash and Pikachu exchanged wary looks.

"To help me prepare a proper pyre and send-off my young one. My little Darkrai."

Ash blinked. "What?" He followed Cresselia as she glided away from him. He went around the rocky ledges, through the trees, and then he came to a stop. The pulsing power from the Psychic Orb rushed through him, coming from the shrine that was there, but that wasn't what caught his attention.

Slumped at the base of the shrine was the unmoving figure of Darkrai. Instantly, Ash knew it wasn't the Darkrai that he met, but that didn't matter. He was so battered and bruised, and his figure was so cold and lifeless, devoid of any Aura. Just like Shaymin said.

"Cresselia..."

"I helped raise this Darkrai from a young age. He wished to protect Newmoon Island while the Alpha was gone. Those monsters did this to him," she looked at the ground. "I wish for you and your friends to help me erect a pyre and pray for my young one to travel safely to the next life. This island may be your safe haven in return."

Ash nodded his head, and Pikachu cooed sadly. "We can do that for you. "

"Thank you. I know you are busy and running out of time and don't have to stop," She nodded towards the shrine. "The Orb is yours as well."

Setting Pikachu on the ground, Ash slowly walked over towards the shrine, careful not to disturb Darkrai's body. He leaned forward, looking into the shrine and reached out, his hand making contact with the smooth orb. He took it out and stared at the light dancing beneath the dark pink surface.

"Cresselia, you're psychic," he said as he slowly walked from the shrine, his eyes still on the orb. "Are we...doing the right thing? Wanting to help with the prison? Or should we just keep going?" He looked up into Cresselia's pink eyes.

"You're conflicted." She sighed. "I'm not surprised. I never thought it was fair to place such a burden on one soul. At least before there were two."

"What?" That surprised Ash a lot. Two Chosen Ones?

"It matters not, that destiny has long since ended and now all that remains is you." She

bowed her head. **"Your mission is of the utmost importance, but what value will you gain if you leave hundreds for slaughter? This scenario is not a case of one versus billions. There are many people here, many people who can and will make a difference in the world should you succeed and it moves on."** Cresselia stared at Ash sympathetically. **"I suppose though, you are not alone, are you? Your friends all love you very much. Love may not win wars. It's not the end-all-be-all, but it is just as powerful a motivator as fear."** She nudged him gently. **"Our enemies don't understand that, and it will be their downfall."**

Ash frowned at that. He understood in a way, but it also confused him quite a bit.

"Ash!" He and Pikachu both jumped as Misty's voice echoed through the tress that surrounded the shrine.

He spun around, looking back and forth before calling out, "Misty?"

"Pikachu?" Pikachu called out and scurried over to a nearby tree, climbing as high as he could and looking around. Ash watched as his Pokémon suddenly started waving wildly. The sound of footsteps reached them, and Pikachu rushed back down.

Misty was the first one that made it through the forest line. She instantly caught sight of Ash and hurried over, skidding to a stop on the grass in front of him. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm fine," Ash assured her. His mind flashed back to the gruesome scene that Cresselia showed him, as well as the figure on the ground by them. "But..."

"Darkrai," Dawn gasped in horror as she took a few steps towards the shrine. "Is he...?"

"Gone," Ash finished for her. "Cresselia wanted to show me that and something else." He held his hand up with the orb in it. "She says we can use the island as a base, but she'd like our help setting up a pyre for Darkrai. Team Galactic and Rocket killed him."

"Go to Newmoon Island," Paul spoke up after a moment. No one quite knew what to say about this sudden revelation, but he knew that they still had a job to do. Leaf's head snapped up and she looked ready to argue, but he held up his hand. "Only a couple were going to go anyway. The rest of us can set up the funeral pyre." He shook his head. "I'm not heartless, Green."

Leaf looked down at the ground, deciding not to comment on it.

Ash looked at his friends and slowly nodded his head, "Paul's right." He turned to face Cresselia again. "Is that okay? As long as we're all back?"

"Yes." She nodded her head and looked in the direction of the island. **"Be wary, a storm is coming and it will be rough outside my barrier. I will keep everyone here safe."**

"Thank you." That was really all Ash could ask for.

...

Cresselia was right. The waves were rough enough that it left Ash, Misty and Gary clinging to Gyarados, who swam low in the water to keep out of sight. Despite this, and the fact that they had to yell over the wind, the three of them still managed to have a conversation.

"That's horrible," Misty concluded after Ash revealed what Cresselia first showed him. "How can they—I don't..." She struggled to find the words but there really was no words to say.

"So we really have to be on our guard," Gary decided. They were going to be cautious to begin with, but knowing the body count that seemed to be coming from the island they were heading to was unsettling. It really made him wonder exactly what they were heading into.

They could see the looming prison in the distance, and it was shocking how big it actually was. They must have erected it incredibly quickly for no one to take notice before the takeover.

The storm was on their side. With Gyarados swimming so low, no one noticed them. If there were any Pokémon in the water for caution, none dared approach one of the ocean's apex predators.

Gyarados stopped by a rocky shore hidden from view of the looming prison itself. Gary climbed off first, Ash following a moment later. He turned around to stare at Misty, who stayed on Gyarados. "Be careful."

She leaned forward so that she was half hanging off her Pokémon and winked at him. "I'll be fine. I have the ocean on my side. Now you two, you be good. No fighting with them or each other or I'll kick both your asses." Neither of them laughed because they knew she could do it. Misty kissed him quickly. "Stay alive."

"Stay alive," he repeated, both in regards to her and a reminder for himself. He watched Gyarados veer off in the water, not liking her going on her own.

Gary placed a hand on his shoulder. "She'll be fine, we're the ones who might get in trouble. You ready to go?"

"Yeah," Ash slowly nodded his head and turned to follow his friends. "Let's see what makes this place tick."

...

Misty always felt comfortable in the ocean. Certainly she respected the power it had, but she never once feared it even in the worst of storms. If anything, she was thankful for the choppy waves and the howling wind. In the darkness, absolutely no one noticed her, even if the island was crawling with Grunts.

She and Gyarados rounded a bend and she gasped, urging her Pokémon to stop. Through the rain, she could still see a spot that was lit up brightly. Gyarados submerged in the water a little more, and Misty gripped her breathing device in case they had to go under really quickly.

She stared at the very distinctive stage that was there, but was incredibly confused. There was something hanging from the thick metal frame that ran across the stage.

Misty flinched and almost slipped off of Gyarados as nausea swept over her. They were gallows and those were people hanging off of it.

That's when she heard it. Even over the rage of the storm, Misty made out a shriek that would haunt her dreams. Her head jerked up, the rain plastering her orange bangs to her skin. Her eyes widened in horror as she watched a figure run to a high ledge and jump off towards the sharp rocks below.

She closed her eyes and turned away before she could see the result. Misty urged Gyarados away from that spot, her entire body shaking.

Whatever this place was, it wasn't just a simple prison, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know what it was.

...

Gary snapped a picture in night vision mode so that there wouldn't be a visible flash but they'd still get more detail than a normal camera. He stayed low to the ground, out of sight. Really, he would have loved to move around to get different points of view, but that would have been a horrible idea. The prison was crawling with Team Galactic grunts. Occasionally, he spied the familiar red R that belonged to Team Rocket, but they were few and far in between.

Ash shifted beside him, his eyes closed and his face twisted into a grimace. His entire body trembled slightly as he tried to use his Aura to feel the island around them, to get a glimpse of what was going on from that point of view. Gary didn't need a special power to realize that whatever he was sensing was upsetting Ash a lot. Every once in a while he would open his eyes and blink several times to shrug off the tears that threatened to well up.

"It's so dark here," Ash muttered quietly when he opened his eyes again. "There's so much suffering here."

Gary was about to reply when a shout made them both jerk up. They backed away into the shadows more, and Ash tensed up, ready to defend them if he had to.

A group of people were brought out into the miserable weather. They were a mix of young and old, male and female, seemingly from every walk of life. Ash watched with confusion as they were all made to kneel down.

"Oh Arceus," Gary gasped. He grabbed Ash's arm and tried to drag him back a bit. "We need to leave, now."

"What—?"

"Don't watch this, Ash," he urged his friend desperately. "Come on."

Getting up where no one could see them, Ash looked around again just in time to see the guards surround the people and raise their guns. Gary grabbed him again and jerked him away, but they didn't get far enough until the sound of gunfire echoed through the air.

Ash came to a sudden stop as it hit him what had just happened. He looked at Gary in shock and tried to say something, but no words would come out.

"This place isn't a prison," Gary said to him as he led the way down towards the shore again. "This is a death camp."

...

Together, May, Dawn, Leaf, Serena, Clemont and Paul managed to erect a beautifully laid out pyre, and had even moved the young Darkrai onto it by the time Ash, Misty and Gary got back. Though questions were asked, none of them wanted to talk about what they had seen yet.

Cresselia floated over Darkrai and stared at him sadly. **"I wish you well on your journey to the next life, young one. You have done us all proud by trying to protect the island."**

Ash listened to Cresselia talk from his spot in between Misty and the comforting form of Charizard. Pikachu rested on the large Pokémon's shoulder, watching with drooped ears. All of their Pokémon were out, gathering around in respect and sadness.

Ria pressed a large piece of drywood into Ash's hands. He stared down at the Lucario for a

moment before holding the wood out to Charizard, who lit the end of it.

Cresselia watched expectantly as he slowly approached the pyre and lit the bottom part on fire. It wasn't something he wanted to do, but Cresselia had specifically asked him to do it, so who was he to say no.

He took a few steps back as the fire caught, feeling Misty take his hand into her own. All of them stared at the flames, grieving for a Pokémon none of them knew but was lost to the senseless violence that they were all familiar with.

"This is going to keep happening," May whispered, her voice piercing through the solemn night.

"What do you mean?" Serena asked her.

She shook her head, clasping her hands together in front of her. "As long as Giovanni is alive nothing good is safe." Her breath hitched as she closed her eyes to fight off the tears.

"What are you saying?" Ash inquired hesitantly, though he was pretty sure he knew where this was going. He just didn't like it.

"He has to pay for what he's done." May grimaced at her own words, though she also seemed resolute in them. "They all do."

"You think he should die." It wasn't a question, Ash knew that's what she meant and it really unsettled him. May was so sweet and bubbly, her temper only flaring up in certain moments. This wasn't like her at all.

He wondered what she'd say if she saw the bodies down on the beach or what was happening over on Newmoon Island.

"What else would we do with him?" Paul asked, bowing his head slightly.

"I don't know," Ash muttered, "but killing him...that would make us just like him. What gives us the right to decide to take his life away?"

"Look at everything he's done." Paul scowled. "Look at everyone he's hurt."

"If we can end all of this, all the people he took from us, all these deaths, they'll mean something," May added.

Ash glanced around at all of his friends, and felt his stomach sink slightly when he realized that no one was shocked or outraged by these statements. If anything, it was a sign that they were all thinking it too. "It's wrong." He looked at Misty for support, and she just squeezed his hand again.

"How do you think this is going to end, Ash?" Leaf asked him grimly as she stared at Darkrai.

"I don't know, but what right do we have to pick what happens to him?"

"Courts will never be fair. He'll get away and we'll end up in a situation like this again." Paul paused and sounded almost disappointed as he kept talking. "How are you supposed to save us if you're so worried about saving the bad guys? How many deaths are you going to let go unanswered for?"

"How much blood are you going to get on your hands before you're the bad guy?" Ash shot back, fed up with a conversation like this, especially when they were supposed to be honouring Darkrai.

Cresselia didn't seem bothered by it though.

"If that means actually saving the world and not just chasing after legends like you're doing? As much as I need to." Paul looked away. "I can be the bad guy if it means saving everyone else. But can you?"

Ash looked away from him, but that was answer enough.

No, he couldn't.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

It's Always Darkest Before Dawn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The fog that surrounded Fullmoon Island was eerie, but none of them were afraid. All of the fire, water and flying-type Pokémon that they had came together to create it, to shroud the arrival of everyone they were waiting for.

Cynthia looked incredibly imposing as the boat she was on appeared from the mist. Once again wearing all black, she stood at the stern of the boat, long hair flowing out behind her in the breeze. She didn't bother to properly get off the boat when it hit the shore, jumping over the railing and down to the beach instead.

She straightened up as the other boats glided towards the shore, making her way directly to where Ash and his friends were all waiting for her.

"Do you have the images?"

"Better," Gary answered her. "Clemont built a couple portable video cameras. We have live feed coming from a couple angles. Not many. They're encoded so no one can pick up on the signal coming from them but us."

"A live feed?" She cocked an eyebrow and looked at the blond teenager. "I am thoroughly impressed. How did you manage that?"

Clemont's cheeks turned pink. "Oh, well, I used some of the things I had with me. It wasn't very hard."

"Not very hard," Cynthia repeated and shook her head. "I'll have to remind Diantha about the asset she has in Kalos after all this is over. We can't let talent like that go to waste. I'd like to see the feeds."

"Sure!" Clemont's face was entirely red by now. "It—it's this way!" He motioned wildly and started to walk away, stumbling a little bit over nothing.

Serena put her hands on her hips as she watched the Champion follow him. She smiled slightly and shook her head. She jumped a bit when Dawn suddenly rushed forward, looking back around to see what got the other girl's attention.

Dawn flung herself at Zoey, hugging her friend tightly. "I didn't think you'd be coming here!"

"Of course!" Zoey laughed as she hugged her.

"Yeah!" Barry agreed, popping up beside them. "Can't let you have all the fun, right?" Kenny and Lucas weren't far behind, both nodding their heads with agreement.

Dawn frowned a bit. "Okay but you guys need to know something first." She licked her dry lips, eyes darting nervously from person to person. "I haven't been over to Newmoon Island, only Ash, Gary and Misty have – actually Ash only went once, Gary and Misty didn't want him going back – but it's really bad there."

"We were told," Zoey said, grimacing. "Cynthia said the prisoners were poorly treated."

Dawn shook her head. "Poorly treated is an understatement. They won't even let me or May see the live feeds Clemont built. I tried to look but Paul stopped me." The fact that Paul of all people was trying to shield her from whatever was happening there was one of the most alarming things to her. "Gary says that it's a death camp."

"A death camp?" Kenny asked, not understanding the term.

"None of the wars in Sinnoh had anything like that," Lucas told him. "The Kantonian Civil War was another story though. The north had death camps. Guess it's not surprising that Gary Oak would know. His grandfather grew up in that war, and it was said to be a brutal one."

"What happened to the north?" Dawn asked almost hesitantly. She vaguely remembered learning about that war in class, but only in how it affected Sinnoh.

"It doesn't exist anymore. It's a wasteland beyond the Silver Mountain Range," Lucas explained grimly. "It was the only way for the violence to end."

Dawn didn't like that story. As she turned her attention to all of the people getting off of the boats, Serena, May, Leaf, and Misty all ushering them to different areas, Dawn couldn't help but wonder what that might mean for them. She didn't like the thought that the only way to stop the violence was to completely wipe out the other side.

Unfortunately, she couldn't think of any way around it either.

...

Ash sat with his back pressed against the cool stone of the shrine. He held the poison and psychic orbs in his hands, twisting them and watching the light dance inside of them. The others were beside him on the ground, each giving off their own unique energy that anyone could see, but not in the way he could.

No one else could. There were definitely other people in the world that had the ability to manipulate Aura like he could, but the odds of them ever finding out about their abilities was pretty slim. Especially since the Aura Guardians were extinct now.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. He wasn't an Aura Guardian. He had no idea what he was really. Gary summed it up fairly well the other day when he tactlessly said he didn't know if Ash was human at all. That had never occurred to the teenager before, but now Ash wasn't sure. Obviously he had two human parents, but it still bothered him a bit.

Though his eyes were closed, Ash still saw Cynthia approach. Her Aura was controlled but bright sometimes reaching out to things that caught her attention. He felt her actually hesitate to say anything, so he spoke up instead, keeping his eyes closed. "I know you're there."

"Riley always knew too." Ash opened his eyes and watched as the Champion came over and knelt on the grass a few feet away from him so that they were eye to eye. She reached out and picked up one of the orbs, the light fading away. "It's hard to believe something so small and fragile-looking is the key to stopping all this suffering."

Small and fragile. That's what Ash felt like sometimes. "I don't know how, but Arceus...he might let people fight one another, but he wouldn't let the world get messed up this badly."

"No, he wouldn't," she agreed. "That's why you don't have to come to Newmoon Island if you don't want to." She had already viewed the images and the live footage and knew that it was a lot worse than she could have ever imagined.

"Everyone says that I have all these choices, but I don't," Ash replied while shaking his head. "I'm not letting my friends go without me."

"Alright. We're going to get organized as quickly as possible. If we wait here too long they'll detect us."

Ash nodded his head. A part of him wanting to ask when she wanted to go, but a part of him also knew that it meant tonight. Cynthia didn't want to waste any time, and he doubted that anyone else did either. Time would make them nervous and unsure. Time would give them away.

As he put the orbs back into his bag, Ash grimaced at how few they actually had in the grand scheme of things. Time wasn't something that they had anymore.

...

Darkness and fog were the perfect cover. For such a large group, everyone moved swiftly and silently, those with water Pokémon leading the way for the first strike. The boats were far too loud for a surprise assault.

"Remember," Cynthia spoke to the group at large before they set out from Fullmoon Island, "we have two objectives. Our first priority is to free and aid as many prisoners as we possibly can. Second, but no less important, is to secure the island. We want to make it impossible for them to use this facility again."

It was followed by a riveting speech about working together to set their region free, to set an example for the other regions to follow.

Misty had to admit, it was a nice sentiment, but that's all it was. Taking this prison would be a huge strike against Team Galactic within Sinnoh, but it was far from the endgame there. A part of her was actually glad that they wouldn't be there to see it all. She didn't want to know what other horrors awaited them in Team Galactic's bases around the region.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, letting the salt air soothe her. She opened her eyes again, staring at the faint shape of the island beyond the fog. The ocean could be treacherous, but it

was her element. She was going to be far safer there than any of the others actually going onto the island. Misty wanted to go with them, but she was a Water Pokémon expert and it made sense to put her where she'd be most suited.

The gentle thud of wings caught her attention and she looked up. It was hard to see through the fog, but Misty knew that Gary was above them on his Aerodactyl. There were other flying Pokémon, but most of them were back with the boats for the second wave, that way the sound of their wings wouldn't give them away.

On his own Gyarados, Crasher Wake stood tall and proud, holding up a hand. Everyone else came to a stop behind him. They all drew closer together at the edge of the fog, the Pokémon all tensing up.

Everything was silent for a moment and then, "Hydro Pump!"

Together, all of the Pokémon launched their attacks in a ferocious wave that slammed into the island. Walls were torn apart, some of the smaller structures outside were completely levelled, and grunts were swept away.

Misty couldn't help but smirk in satisfaction when she saw that that one blow destroyed the gallows.

"Move out!" Crasher yelled, and the Pokémon all surged forward.

Above them, the flying Pokémon swept down. Aerodactyl screeched loudly, unleashing winds that tossed the opposing trainers coming their way aside.

"Aerodactyl!" Gary called out. "Let's start ripping those walls apart!"

"Everyone, use your strongest water attack! Keep them covered!" Misty yelled to her six Pokémon.

Other trainers around them individually called to their Pokémon as well. All being mindful of the fact that they were there to save the prisoners, not injure them in the crossfire. It was still a magnificently beautiful sight to Misty though.

Team Galactic wasn't expecting this type of attack at all, and that was going to be their downfall.

...

Those who were going onto the island itself to break out prisoners used the water and air teams' strikes to their advantage. It was a good enough distraction that a wave of people managed to get onto the island before anyone even noticed.

Ash was one of those people, though he was pretty sure no one could have stopped him from going on the island. Holding onto Charizard, they swooped down to the roof of the building. A couple Galactic Grunts yelled in shock, but were quick to release their Pokémon.

Ash didn't have to tell Charizard anything as he jumped off his back. The Pokémon roared loudly and unleashed a torrent of fire on the Pokémon that rushed them.

Pikachu lunged off of Ash's shoulder, cheeks sparking as he darted forward. His electricity washed over any Pokémon or person it could reach, and those that got too close to him were met with his Iron Tail.

While this was happening, Ash ran to the door that would lead inside and to the upper level of

prisoners. Unfortunately, it was firmly shut with a keypad. His brow furrowed as he tried to figure out how to get inside.

He felt something hard press against the back of his head. "G—get away from it!" Ash turned around, finding himself looking down the barrel of a gun. The Grunt holding it looked entirely too nervous, his clothes singed by one of Ash's Pokémon. He didn't know who it was, but he was proud of them.

Ash raised an eyebrow. Oddly enough, he didn't feel afraid at all. "Yeah, no." He thrust his hand out, and the Grunt was thrown backwards by an invisible wave of Aura, his gun falling off of the roof.

For a brief moment, Ash wondered if he could 'nicely' ask that person for the code to get in. Then he blinked and stared at his hand. "I'm stupid." He generated an Aura Sphere and slammed it into door, watching with satisfaction as it blew inwards.

"Let's go!" Ash called to his Pokémon.

Pikachu rushed over to him, but Charizard roared and shook his head, sitting on top of a defeated Grunt.

Ash tilted his head slightly. "You wanna stay outside to help?" Another roar. "Alright, but be careful!" Charizard eyed him like he was insane. None of them were ever careful.

Despite his misgivings at leaving the Pokémon outside, Ash still ran in, Pikachu at his heels. He had to get the prisoners out, and then he had to get down to where there was apparently a more fortified structure (that's what Clemont said when he hacked the blueprints). There, he would meet up with Paul to take it out. The idea was to get in and out of everywhere as fast as they could.

He burst through a door, coming face to face with another startled Grunt. She stared at him for a moment before opening her mouth to yell, but he was quicker. "Pikachu!"

"Pika!" Pikachu rushed around the woman's legs, unleashing his static electricity in the process. She toppled to the ground, as did everyone else that Pikachu ran by. Shockwave wasn't an ability Pikachu used often, but its temporary paralysis was definitely coming in handy now.

"Your turn guys!" Ash tossed his other Pokéballs into the air, releasing Ria, Garchomp, Greninja and Sceptile. "Break open as many cells as you can! Just watch the people!" They all nodded and went their own ways.

"What's happening?" A man asked as Ash helped him out of one of the cells. "Who are you?"

"Uh...I'm with Champion Cynthia. We're getting you all out of here."

Whispers echoed in the prison block as the Pokémon sliced and tore the bars apart. This was going really well so far.

That's exactly how Ash knew something bad was going to happen.

...

Leaf crouched low, brown eyes focused on her target. He was distracted, trying to talk to someone over the phone in a panicked tone. He had every right to be afraid, and he didn't even realize the real danger that he was in yet.

"Esp." Espeon came around the corner, startling the man. He stared at the Pokémon, and she stared back. His hand slowly reached for the Pokéball on his belt, but he was too late. Eyes still locked, Espeon's began to glow a bright red. A moment later, he was asleep on the floor.

"Thank you, sweetie," Leaf cooed to her Pokémon as she came through the door. The Pokémon brushed against her leg affectionately. "Alright, so this room looks clear. Which way?"

"We still need to get a few floors up," Clemont said as he came through the doorway. "I'm not exactly sure—huh—I wonder." He took out a Pokéball and tossed it into the air, unleashing his Magnezone. "Can you follow the electrical currents to somewhere that's using a lot of electricity? We're looking for a control room of sorts."

"Zone," the Pokémon said, moving its entire body in a nod.

Leaf put her hands on her hips and watched the Pokémon look at the walls before floating up the nearby stairs. "You know, I will never not be impressed with you." She slapped his back in what was meant to be a friendly way, but he ended up just pitching forward and coughing. "Sorry. Come on, no time to waste."

Clemont nodded and the two of them rushed after his Pokémon, Espeon darted after them.

...

Serena tried to hide her watery eyes as she held onto the steel bars that separated her from the woman inside. The woman, everyone, was so relieved to see them that it was enough to make her want to cry. There wasn't a single person without bruises and grime, and everything smelled horrible. Anyone would be miserable there.

"So, we have a problem," Kenny said as he hurried into the cellblock.

"A problem?" Serena repeated, turning her attention to him.

"Yeah. The guard with the keys took off and we can't find another set."

Serena thought about that. None of her Pokémon were strong enough to rip through the bars of the cage without hurting someone in the process. She bit her lip as she looked down at the lock.

An idea came to her, but she wasn't sure it would work. Digging in her bag, Serena took out a key ring with three golden keys on it. She glanced at the woman in the cell and asked, "Did you see the key? Do you think any of these might work?"

The blue-haired woman that looked so familiar for some reason glanced down at them. "This one here, if it didn't have that piece on the end and top. It looks similar."

Slowly, Serena nodded her head, realizing that she was talking about the decorative aspects of the key. It was the first one that she had ever won. Yet it wasn't worth the lives of these people. Pressing it against the hard surface of the wall, Serena snapped the pieces off. She turned to the lock and prayed that it would work. She had to jiggle it around a bit, but relief rushed through her when the lock finally clicked open.

"I'll go around opening the cells up! You guys and Barry help them get out!" Serena ordered Kenny and Lucas, not bothering to hear what they had to say as she took her ruined key and sprinted to the next cell. She was vaguely sure that she heard the name 'Johanna' mentioned but it meant nothing to her. They must have been meeting people that they knew already.

She just hoped that they'd move fast enough to get everyone out alive. Surely Team Galactic would start taking it out on the prisoners. With that thought in mind, she moved even faster from cell to cell, opening the doors one at a time.

The decorative pieces of her key fell to the floor, kicked aside as people rushed out of the room.

...

Dawn couldn't find her mother anywhere, and she didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Already, she helped dozens of prisoners get out of their cells, but she was always looking for her mother's sparkling blue eyes.

That was what led her to separating from her group. It was stupid to do, and Piplup loudly protested it, but she ignored her Pokémon.

Quietly, Dawn darted from room to room, checking to see if there were more prison cells in their area. She had found a lot of other things, from an empty medical wing, to what looked suspiciously like an interrogation room, to a normal bathroom. Nothing seemed to have any rhyme or reason to it, probably because it was set up so quickly.

Her hand landed on a door handle that actually did move, much to her surprise. Most of Dawn's finds were simply locked doors so far, so she always got excited when she found an unlocked one.

Piplup was trailing behind her, looking around cautiously. A vile stench reached him the second that Dawn started to push the door open. His eyes watered as he hurried towards his trainer, protesting loudly. "Pip piplup pip!"

Dawn gagged as the smell hit her too. It was too late to close the door without seeing the contents, and in that moment, she felt like her heart stopped. She screamed and stumbled backwards, leaving the door open, unable to tear her eyes away from the battered, bruise corpses inside. Shock rushed through her body as she stared at lifeless eyes hidden by cracked glasses. She knew him.

Piplup rushed to the door and slammed it shut. Dawn slowly pushed herself to her feet and tried to take a step forward, but nausea welled up within her. She twisted around and threw up.

Maybe she should have listened to Ash when he tried to get her to stay behind.

...

Misty was drenched from head to toe. She didn't let it bother her; she was more worried about staying on top of Gyarados' head. The Pokémon's scales became slick, and with his rapid movements, it made it hard to hold on.

Normally, she wouldn't be worried about falling into the water, but the fighting managed to catch the interest of a school of wild Sharpedo. She wasn't afraid of the Pokémon, but she knew enough to be wary of them when they were like this. It was unsettling to a lot of people so far.

Their mission had shifted from attacking the shores to defending the boats that were trying to get people away from the prison.

There was a sudden screech that startled Misty. She jumped, almost slipping off of Gyarados' head. Twisting around, she watched in horror as Aerodactyl and Gary fell towards the ocean. Gary managed to recall the rock and flying-type before he himself slammed into the waves. Misty winced, knowing that he would have been fine falling from that height, but it still would have stung.

Her sea-green eyes darted to the water, and her stomach plummeted when she recognized a Sharpedo fin heading towards where Gary fell. She looked back at the battle and then said, "Gyarados, keep doing what you're doing, I'll be back!" With that, she dove into the water.

...

To say that Paul was frustrated would have been an understatement. Already, he got through more than just the area he was designated, helping anyone that he came across.

He stared at the thick walls of the odd room with apprehension. It was an odd setup, a room within a room. He could walk around the entire thing, finding only a thick, steel door to enter. He remembered Cynthia warning him, after looking at the floor plans, that they might find some gruesome things there. The only thing he knew from a quick glance earlier when a Grunt came out was that there were people chained to the walls.

Paul glanced at his watch. Ash should have been here already. He weighed the pros and cons of waiting for the other trainer. His Pokémon could certainly break through the wall, but he didn't know where the people were chained up. He could very well end up killing or hurting someone if he did that. If he waited to Ash, not only could he sense where the people were inside (which was still weird to think about), but his Garchomp and Sceptile would be able to cut away smaller spots with their thin claws and blades.

He wanted to go barging in, but he knew that he had to wait.

"Come on, Ketchum," he muttered under his breath. "What's taking you so long?"

...

Ash opened his eyes once he realized that the last person he released managed to get out of the building. He sighed and wanted to slump down to the floor and just close his eyes, he was so tired and weary after all of the injured people he had seen, after all of the stories they told him.

There was still more to do though. He had to meet up with Paul even though he'd rather go and check up on his other friends. He didn't dare try to reach out to their individual auras, not wanting to feel their distress at that moment. He'd run to them, and he still had a job to do.

The more prisoners that were free, the lighter everything felt to him. It let him feel like he could breathe a little easier.

Ash closed his eyes once again, concentrating to make sure there was no one else trapped in his area. That was when he felt it. It was masked by the despair, the hopelessness that the prisoners originally had, but their renewed hope made it stand out like a dark beacon.

"Pikachu," he muttered to his ever-loyal friend. "There's an orb here too."

"Pi?" Pikachu's ears perked up. His other Pokémon all looked at him with interest.

Ash held out his arm, and Pikachu jumped up onto his shoulder. He inched towards a hallway and stared down it. He had no idea where it went, but the orb was there, he could feel it. The problem was, it went in the exact opposite direction of where Paul was probably waiting.

He shifted uncomfortable and looked back at his Pokémon. "What do I do, guys?"

"Sceptile," the grass-type said. "Scept scept tile tile."

"You're right, they might bring this place down," Ash agreed.

"Nin ninja gren ninja," Greninja said, pumping his fist in the air. Garchomp nodded his head, though Ria simply crossed her arms.

"Pi pikapi," Pikachu agreed. Ash smiled, they would support him in any decision he made.

"We need that orb," Ash mumbled to himself. His eyes shifted to Ria. "I want you to go and meet up with Paul. You can actually talk to him to explain things. Help him however you can."

"If you're sure," her soothing voice whispered in his mind. Ash missed having Ria and all of his Pokémon out of their Pokéballs more often, but it just wasn't safe to do that lately.

"Yeah. Go." She nodded and darted off in the other direction. Ash looked at his other Pokémon. "You three are going back in your Pokéballs for now." He didn't give them a chance to object. As looked back at the dark hallway and ran down the stairs.

...

"Open the door!" Leaf shoved the Galactic grunt face first into the door of the control center. She grunted and glared up at her captor, about to defy her, when a deep, low growl reminded her of the Pokémon that wasn't far behind her. Half concealed by the shadows, the Beartic looked frightening as she glared at her fiercely.

The female grunt grudgingly typed in the passcode, and the door to the command center slip open. Espeon darted in first, using her abilities to put everyone inside to sleep.

"Thank you, sweetie," Leaf said to her Pokémon before glaring at the grunt. "You're gonna chill for a little bit, just in case we need you." She shoved the other girl into the room and then let go of her. Before she could even try to run, the Beartic froze her legs in place.

Ignoring the cursing woman, Leaf turned back to the hall. "We're all good here!"

Clemont came in, stepping over the sleeping people without a second glance. He made his way over to the workstations and started bringing up different screens. "There are a lot of passwords on this."

"Need me to get it from her?" Leaf asked, nodding towards their captive.

"No." Clemont pulled something out of his bag. "This system isn't very advanced. It was set up really quickly. I'll get it." He used a couple cables to attach his laptop to the bigger computer. "Just make sure no one tries to get in, alright?"

"I can do that." As Clemont worked, Leaf started pulling the unconscious grunts out the door so that, if they woke up, they wouldn't be in the same room as them. She closed the door behind her and silently paced back and forth for a few minutes.

A loud, buzzing sound startled Leaf. She whipped around and stared out the window in front of them, the one that looked over a prison block below. Leaning forward, Leaf watched as the doors opened and confused people started coming out of them. "What did you do?"

"I'm not doing this," Clemont said slowly, alarm tinting his voice. "Leaf, this isn't me and I'm the only one of us connected to the system here. Or I should be the only one."

"Are you telling me Team Galactic is doing this?" Leaf felt her stomach drop. Whipping around,

she looked at the grunt that they still had captive, eyeing the way the woman was smiling for only a moment before she moved. "What the hell is going on?"

"Sprinklers."

Clemont's head jerked up as the sprinklers inside the prison block turned on, soaking everyone before. He started typing rapidly, going through different files, trying to find out what was going on while also doing his original task. "Leaf, they're redirecting power to something in that room."

"Can you stop it?" She asked, leaning over his shoulder to look at the screens. How he understood anything on them was beyond her.

"If I do what Cynthia asked, yeah – but –."

"Have you ever gotten electrocuted before?" The Team Galactic Grunt asked. "I heard it hurts a lot."

"Why would you...?" Leaf trailed off, her eyes going wide. "They're going to electrify that room somehow." Clemont gaped at her and they both looked on in horror as the sprinklers shut off. "Get the power off!"

"I'm trying!" Clemont started typing furiously. He kept glancing at his other screen, watching the power levels in the other room shift. "Come on. Come on!"

"Would you shut—?!" She screamed as the woman somehow got out of her icy confines and tackled the other girl. Leaf gasped as she was thrown to the floor, knocking the wind out of her lungs.

Beartic roared and lumbered towards them, but the woman pulled a gun from her boot.

"No!" Leaf screamed as she launched herself from the floor. The bang made her ears ring, and she couldn't even hear Beartic roar in pain as her fur started to turn red. Leaf slammed her entire body onto the woman's arm, throwing them both to the floor again. Without another thought, she grabbed her Pokéballs and called back her Pokémon, knowing that if they were in there, at least their injuries couldn't get any worse for the time being.

"Leaf!" Clemont called out to her. He was about to jump up but she shook her head.

"No! I got this! Turn the power off!" The woman flipped them both over, trying to wrestle for the gun. She slammed her knee into Leaf's stomach, and the girl once again ended up recoiling from the pain. The grunt grabbed the gun again, and turned towards Clemont, who was typing furiously.

Leaf got up again, and the two young women started wrestling over the gun.

Clemont could hear the struggle behind him, and he wanted to turn around and help, but from the levels of power rising, he had very little time to do what he needed to do. This was all happening far too fast.

He gasped and closed his eyes when he heard two more loud bangs. Outside of the ringing in his ears, everything was silent. All he could do was stare at the screen and breathe heavily. He heard someone move behind him, and hesitantly looked around. Leaf stumbled over, slumping into the chair beside him. She was holding her arm, keeping the bleeding in check.

"You're hurt."

"Bullet grazed me." Her stare was vacant, and Clemont decided to ignore the distinctive blood splatter on her clothes. The whole altercation took less than a minute, and it made him sick that he couldn't do anything to stop it.

There was something he could do for her though.

"Do me a favour. Close your eyes and hum really loudly. Or sing."

"Wha—?"

"Please."

Leaf felt unwilling tears well up in her eyes as she understood. Her hand hovered over Beartic's Pokéball, and her tears started to fall. The sooner they got this over with, the sooner she could get her Pokémon some help.

She released Venusaur, who ignored the body on the floor and just moved to her side. Leaf turned around, burying her face into the Pokémon's scaly side. The light flickered above them, and Leaf started to hum, Venusaur mimicking her.

Clemont couldn't get the power off in time.

...

Serena sighed in relief as she managed to pry open the last door. It was nothing short of a miracle that all of them happened to use the same key, and that she managed to manipulate one of hers to make it work. Inside, there was a small, old lady, standing protectively in front of a man even older than she as well as several small children.

"It's okay, we're here to help you escape," Serena told them, smiling warmly. Barry rushed up to her side, skidding a bit and accidentally slamming into her. Serena stumbled a bit and glared at him, but he just smiled unapologetically. He was quick to lead the kids to safety, his limitless energy pouring out of him.

The elderly couple came out next. "Thank you, bless your hearts," the old woman said. "We needed to protect our great-grandchildren."

"Don't worry, everything's going to be okay now," Serena assured her. She glanced up, smiling as the other two came towards them. "This is Lucas, Barry and Kenny. They'll be able to help you."

"Where are you going?" Kenny asked her.

"Just making sure that there's no one else here hiding." Serena waved him away as she started going from cell to cell, peaking into them. She felt surprisingly upbeat, considering the conditions of the prison. At least they were getting everyone out.

She looked up as the lights flickered and wonder if Clemont was getting ready to power everything down. That was when a loud creaking sound filled the air, making her hair stand on end.

"Serena!" She bolted out of the cell when she heard Barry's loud voice yell her name. Alarm spiked in her as she watched a security door of sorts come down from the ceiling. She rushed forward, but it was too late, she was trapped on one side, and everyone else was on the other.

She looked back and forth, unable to see a way out of her predicament. What she did see was an elderly couple with their frightened great-grandchildren, and that was just the beginning of the

people.

"Lead them outside! I'll catch up!"

"No, you won't." She whipped around, her heart dropping. Standing at the other end of the thin hall was a man dressed in a Team Galactic uniform. She took a few steps back until her back hit the metal door. "You're not going anywhere, sweetheart."

...

Dawn thought she was a goner. In her moment of nausea and weakness, she hadn't noticed the enemies approaching her. Now she was cornered, and the only Pokémon that she had out was Piplup. The man looming over her had one of those Pokéball jammers, so she couldn't get any of her other Pokémon out. She was trapped with nowhere to go. Piplup was strong, but this man had a gun. She held the Pokémon to her chest, not willing to let him go to confront this person.

Then the door exploded inwards, crashing into another grunt. Fire surrounded Blaziken as he knelt between her and the grunt.

"Are you okay?" Dawn jumped a bit and looked around as Zoey knelt beside her.

"Yeah, I'm fine, where's...?" She trailed off as May hurried beside her Pokémon. With her messy hair and her fierce expression, she reminded Dawn more of a cornered Pokémon that was ready to fight over anything else. "May?"

"Where are your other Pokémon?" The older girl demanded.

"They have a jammer over there! I couldn't get them out!"

May's head snapped around to look at the device, and for a moment, she saw red. "Get rid of that jammer!" Her voice pitched as she recognized the device that prevented them from being able to use their Pokémon in Hoenn. If they would have been able to, there was no way that Drew would have fallen.

Blaziken leapt over the men, slamming his foot down onto the device. May instantly reached to her pouch and grabbed her Pokéballs, tossing two of them into the air. In an explosion of light, Glaceon and an Altaria appeared.

"Go Purugly! Bronzong!" The leader of the group unleashed his Pokémon, the two others that were in the room with them unleashing similar Pokémon.

"Gallade, Leafeon!" Zoey called out, and her two Pokémon appeared. "There's not a lot of room to watch out for each other!"

Dawn pushed herself to her feet, still holding Piplup in her arms. He had fought enough. Mamoswine would have been much too big for this hallway, but all of her other Pokémon were a bit smaller. "Lopunny! Zorua!" She tossed her two Pokéballs into the air.

The Pokémon all lunged at one another, but May's eyes were fixated on the broken Pokéball jammer. Her hands slowly curled into tight fists, her hairs digging into her palms. "Glaceon! Come here!" Her third Pokémon darted out of the battle, looking at her trainer curiously. Slowly, May's eyes turned to the Team Galactic grunts. "Freeze the floor under their feet."

"Glay?"

"Just do it!"

Glacion was quick to follow her trainer's orders, though she didn't understand it. The only way to avoid the Pokémon fighting was to get behind the other grunts, who didn't notice the steel floor freezing behind them.

Dawn quickly realized that, though Team Galactic was able to talk big when they had one girl cornered and unable to call out her Pokémon, once they were put into a situation that constituted a fair fight, they didn't stand a chance. Their Pokémon fell like dead leaves in autumn, even to her relatively new Zorua.

Realizing that they were beat, the men left the Pokémon and were about to run, but slipped on the ice behind them.

"Blaziken! Altaria! Stop them!" May yelled, pointing at the men. Altaria jetted through the air, blocking the door, and Blaziken jumped, landing on the other side of them.

"What are you doing?" Zoey asked, red eyes darting from one person to the next. "We beat them! They're harmless!"

"They would have killed Dawn if we didn't show up!" May growled, not bothering to look back at them. "They don't get to run away!"

"Just let us go! We won't hurt anyone else! We promise!" One of the men practically pleaded.

"I don't believe you," May whispered, shaking her head. "Blaziken—!"

Dawn grabbed the girl's arm. "Don't do something you'll regret!"

"Regret? You think I'd regret stopping these people? You saw what they did to the people here!" May spun around and pushed Dawn away. "You saw what they did to everyone out there!" She pointed to the wall. "How many good people died because of them? Because of the things they made?" She pointed at the Pokéball jammer. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Why do they get to live when everything that's good is ruined?"

"They have to pay, they do, but not like this. If this is what ends up happening then all the good is gone because we made it that way. We got rid of it trying to fight them, becoming like them." Dawn shook her head as tears streamed down her cheeks as she whispered, "I didn't know him well, but I do know that Drew wouldn't want this."

May looked back at the three men cowering between her powerful Pokémon. Her breath hitched in her throat. Her shoulders started to shake, and she felt like she was choking as her tears started to fall.

"Get out of here!" Zoey snapped to the grunts, who were quick to scurry out of the other door. All of the Pokémon in the room and Zoey looked at the two other girls.

Dawn felt her heart break when a strangled sob escaped May. The other girl collapsed to her knees, burying her face in her hands as she sobbed. She knelt in front of her, hugging the brunette tightly as her own tears fell.

...

Serena panicked. She was cornered in a hallway with a rather imposing man blocking the only escape. During this entire journey, she was well aware of the fact that she was in over her head in a

way that no one else was. She was the weak link, the useless one. Her blue eyes flickered down to the man's hand. He had a Pokéball jammer, so she couldn't even fight back with her Pokémon. These people would use her to try and manipulate the others, and her friends might get hurt as they tried to help her.

Her panic vanished as his arm suddenly shot out. Serena didn't think as she ducked under his fist, and she certainly didn't think when she curled her hand into a fist (just like Misty showed her) and slammed it into the soft tissue just below his ribcage. He gasped and lurched forward, momentarily distracted. That was enough for Serena.

She grabbed the Pokéball jammer out of his hand and hurried around him, slamming the device into the wall as she ran.

"You bitch!" The grunt roared at her. Serena didn't look back, but she heard him coming after her. He grabbed her arm and yanked her back, but not in time to stop her from grabbing one of her Pokéballs. "Sylveon!"

"Ve!" Sylveon took in the scene within a split second of appearing. Her bright blue eyes narrowed and the ribbons around her neck lashed out, wrapping around the man that was hurting her trainer. With a strength that one wouldn't associate with such a small and pretty Pokémon, Sylveon hauled him up in the air and slammed him on the floor.

Serena fell to the floor from the force of the man being ripped away from her. She was quick to jump back up, grabbing three more of her Pokéballs from her bag. "Vivillon, put him to sleep!" Her bug-type Pokémon nodded and flew at the grunt. Serena looked back around to Delphox and Pancham. "Delphox, I need you to heat up that door, make the metal soft. Pancham, I need you to kick it off when she does, okay?"

"Phox!"

"Pan!" The two Pokémon rushed towards the door.

Serena watched them go, looking down only when she felt something soft brush against her leg. Sylveon looked up at her with worried eyes.

"I'm okay," She assured the Pokémon. That's when it occurred to her. She was perfectly fine, and she did it on her own.

In the grim prison block with no one but her Pokémon and an unconscious Team Galactic grunt, Serena laughed.

....

Clemont kept his eyes glued onto the computer screen. If he looked up, he'd see a gruesome sight that he couldn't possibly handle. So instead, he focused on the codes flashing before him, and the sounds of the Venusaur and Leaf humming. He didn't want to think about Beartic who was inside of her Pokéball now. He didn't want to think about the sounds he heard. He didn't want to think about the vacant expression in Leaf's eyes. Clemont didn't need to turn around to know exactly what had happened.

The Galactic grunt didn't get back up to bother them again, after all.

For a moment, Clemont's mind flashed to Bonnie. He wondered what his sister was doing at the moment. On one hand, it felt wrong to even think of the sweet girl in a place like this, but on the other, he needed something good to focus on. Something bright in the middle of all the morbid

darkness that surrounded them.

His fingers paused in their typing. He stared at the screen, double-checking everything. He hesitated, but then clicked on last button.

Instantly, the lights all shut off, and he could hear the hum of electricity fade away until there was nothing left.

Slowly, he reached out and blinding searched for Leaf. His hand landed on her shoulder, and she hissed in pain, her humming coming to an abrupt halt. Clemont listened to her breathing before she whispered, "Do you think anyone down there is still alive?"

"I don't know." He didn't want to say no, but he didn't see how anyone could have survived that.

...

Paul was furious as he stared at the short Pokémon before him. "What do you mean, Ash isn't coming?"

"Do I need to explain it again?"Ria asked, annoyance tinting her tone. **"There is an orb here. We need to get it."**

"So a glass ball takes priority over people?" He yelled, motioning to the room.

She glared at him. **"Of course not! That's why he sent me!"**

"I needed specific Pokémon for this not...you." Paul spat the word like it was an insult.

Ria brushed by the frustrated trainer. She placed her hand against the steel wall and closed her eyes, focusing on the people inside. Alarmed, she jerked her arm back. **"Something's wrong! They're panicking!"** She held her arm back, generating an Aura Sphere in it.

"You'll hit someone. It's why I wanted Sceptile or Garchomp here!" Paul spat at the Pokémon. He knew she had some of the same abilities Ash did, but this wasn't according to the plan. Then again, Ash always was the one to do whatever it was he wanted.

"There is no good way in! They're dying in there!" Ria focused on the heavy door and threw her Aura Sphere at it. She grunted, focusing her energy on the door in a steady beam, rather than just the sphere itself. She watched the cracks start to appear in the door. A moment later, it exploded inwards, shards of metal landing on the floor.

Instantly, Ria realized the mistake she and reached out her arms again, this time creating a barrier in front of the door. **"It's some sort of poisonous gas."**

"We need to get them out!" Paul urged her.

"If I drop this barrier it'll just spread out here and kill even more people! If I could somehow keep it up and put one around myself to get people out..." Ria trailed off, knowing that she couldn't do that. Her strength was her offense, not defense. Ash was the one that was good at protecting.

Almost like he could sense her thoughts, Paul scowled. "But if Ketchum was here, it wouldn't be a problem, right? He could keep the poison in while you bring everyone out." It wasn't a question, he didn't need an answer from her to know that he was right. "So what, we watch them die?"

Paul got close enough so that he could see inside, his eyes instantly locking onto someone almost directly across from the door. His entire body tensed as he recognized him. "Reggie!"

Ria watched in alarm as Paul rushed towards the door. She threw her arm out, catching his stomach, and throwing him backwards.

"What are you doing?" Paul raged. "That's my brother!"

"You'll die!"

"He's only here because of me! I have to save him!" Paul eyed her for a moment. "Even if it means getting you out of the way. Keep her back!"

Ria gasped as she was surrounded by Paul's Pokémon. She tried to stop him again, tried to jump over them, but she was tossed back and held down, her barrier vanishing. **"No!"**

Paul put his shirt over his mouth and nose, running instead.

"Lu lucario!" She switched back to her native tongue, which was much easier to use with other Pokémon rather than projecting English thoughts.

"Terra terra tort," the Pokémon said, firm but sad.

"Cario," Ria growled. Using her small size and flexibility to her advantage, the Lucario managed to flip herself up onto the Pokémon's back. She tried to launch herself at the door, but Electivire grabbed her and threw her at the wall. Ria grunted as she hit it, cracks appearing on it from the impact. She got back up and Magmortar came after her.

None of the Pokémon really knew who it was that finally smashed the wall in their brawl, but smash it they did. An entire part of it came crumbling down, proving it wasn't as well-built as some people would have liked to think it was.

Panic erupted in Ria's chest. She focused on the poison and tried to use her Aura to manipulate it into a bubble. Some fumes still lingered in the air, causing people and Pokémon to cough and choke. Not quite sure what to do, she tossed the sphere out the window.

Ria turned back to the ruined room, freezing when she saw Paul kneeling on the ground, rubble and heavy chunks of the wall covering his unconscious brother's lower body.

Paul looked up at her, and Ria cringed back from his expression. When she hit the wall, she hadn't even thought about the people inside that could have been hurt. Judging from the guilt that radiated from the other Pokémon around her, they felt the same way.

This was their mistake, and there was no way to take it back.

...

Some people joked that Misty was a sea creature that somehow ended up walking on land instead. She usually chose to take that as a compliment, and as she swam into the dark, cold water, she wondered if they had a point. Others would have been terrified since something could come at them from any direction, but not her.

She once told Melody that she wasn't afraid of the ocean, and that still held true. What she did fear was others on the ocean.

Despite the low visibility, Misty was still able to zero-in on Gary. She also saw the outline of one of the large Sharpedo coming towards him. Gary flailed in the water and managed to move out of the way, though the Pokémon's fin caught the edge of his jacket. He was jerked backwards and down deeper.

Misty mentally cursed as she swam after him. She managed to reach out and grab his arm, yanking him off of the vicious Pokémon. The Sharpedo turned to face them, bearing a mouth filled with razor sharp teeth. Misty narrowed her eyes.

The Pokémon shot at them, and Misty shoved Gary out of the way. She slammed her hand close to the Sharpedo's eye. It jerked back from them in pain, and Misty took the opportunity to swim towards the surface, pulling Gary along with her.

He gasped for air when they finally got to the surface, allowing her to drag him along to Gyarados. "You're a machine, aren't you?"

"I try," Misty replied with a breathless laugh. She couldn't imagine how difficult that would have been if they couldn't hold their breath for so long. "Stay here, stop getting yourself in trouble." An electric attack from the shore flew by them.

"Easier said than done," Gary said dryly.

...

Ash heaved himself out of the pile of crushed stone, relief rushing through him as he took in a breath of relatively clear air. He slumped down on the stones for a moment, twisting the Dark Orb in his hand. He should have known that it was on the island. What else would have prompted Darkrai to protect it?

He frowned a bit at that. The Alphas were supposed to be protecting these as far as he knew, so the fact the Alpha Darkrai basically passed this duty off to another Darkrai, who got killed because of it, infuriated him.

As much as he would have liked to, Ash could never pass his mission on to anyone else.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cried out in alarm.

So distracted by his thoughts and the power of the orb in his hand, Ash hadn't even noticed the negative aura filling the room until it was too late. His Aura wasn't limitless, and he was already tired from using it so much.

He looked up, jumping to his feet and taking a defensive pose as he came face to face with Cyrus.

"Ash Ketchum." It was eerie how much this Mirage truly sounded like that man. "It has been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Cut the crap, I know you're not Cyrus." Ash had absolutely no time or patience for this right now. "So who's controlling you? Giovanni?"

Cyrus suddenly started laughing loudly. "Clever. I knew you would figure it out if you ever came face to face with this. An answer for an answer? What is that? It must be important if you separated from your friends to get it."

Ash's body tensed as he realized Cyrus was asking about the orb. Pikachu growled lightly, and Ash put it in his pocket. "Who are you?"

"No? We don't want that? It's not nice to deny people what they want to know. Ask your friend here." Cyrus stepped aside, and Ash took a step back as the Mirage Darkrai floated into the room. It took him a moment to see the natural aura through all the wrongness of the Mirage beings.

He inhaled sharply. "Ritchie!"

"Yes, this boy came to us pretending to be you. The idiots actually gave your friends the money, unbelievable. It was worth it to get you though. Darkrai."

Darkrai tossed Ritchie, and Ash lunged forward, using his exhausted Aura to help him catch his friend. Under his weight, Ash sank down onto his knees, holding the other teenager. "Ritchie?" He stared at his friend's paler than normal skin, covered in bruises and cuts. His clothes were dirty and soaked in old blood, his breathing labored. "What did you do to him?"

"We chatted," Cyrus said. "He wasn't responsive, so we made him respond. It turns out, he couldn't tell us much about you."

"Me? This is...because of me?" Ash looked at Ritchie's injuries. "Why? What do I matter to you?"

"What's probably in your head now is worth everything, don't you know that? What I saw years ago was probably just scratching the surface."

With those words, Ash knew exactly who he was really talking to. "Yung."

The Mirage Cyrus paused for a moment before his image rippled and distorted, changing into another familiar figure that made Ash's blood boil. "You've gotten a little more clever over the years. That's good. There's no room for dull brains in my new world."

"Your new world?" Ash snorted, shifting away a bit and tugging Ritchie with him. Pikachu planted himself firmly in front of the two boys. "Giovanni would kill you if he heard you say that."

"Giovanni isn't going to be around to see it. He doesn't know the true beauty of my Mirage Pokémon. I'm the only one that does."

Ash's brow furrowed slightly, but his attention shifted as Ritchie groaned. He looked down as his friend's eyes fluttered open, focusing up on him. "Ash?"

"We're going to get you some help, I promise!"

"Ash, you need to—."

"Darkrai!" Yung yelled, interrupting whatever Ritchie was trying to say. The Mirage Pokémon streaked at them.

"Pika!" Pikachu's cheeks sparked before he unleashed a wave of lightning. Darkrai got through the attack easily, tossing the small Pokémon aside.

"Pikachu!" Ash cried out in alarm as he watched Pikachu slump on the floor. The Pokémon still managed to hold up a hand, giving him a thumb up.

"Grab him, we need to go!" Yung called out. Ash gasped in alarm as Darkrai grabbed him by the back of his neck. He was jerked up, and Ritchie tumbled out of his arms onto the floor, gasping from the impact that woke him.

"No!" Ash struggled in Darkrai's grip. He quickly focused, forming an Aura Sphere despite the

energy from the fake Darkrai interfering a bit. He twisted and slammed the Aura Sphere into Darkrai, faltering when nothing happened.

"You didn't think I'd account for that? Why do you think it was so important to have that Riley boy to test?" Yung asked, speaking as if he was a small, slow child. "I've kept what you can do for myself for now. I don't want to share those abilities with anyone else just yet."

Ash wasn't going to make it easy on them. He struggled and jerked around wildly, vaguely realizing that the keystone on his mega ring was starting to glow. He looked up as the wall started to shake, and a moment later, it exploded inwards. Ash was ripped from Darkrai's arms and into another pair. The next thing he knew, he was back on the other side of the room, the furious form of Charizard hovering over him protectively.

"We need to get rid of them both." Ash told the seething Pokémon. He touched his keystone. "I think this is a good reason, don't you?"

Charizard glanced down at the matching ring on his wrist, a glowing, mostly orange stone in it. He growled and nodded his head and both stones started to glow brightly.

Light surrounded Charizard, and when it vanished, he was taller, the crest on his head larger with more spikes on his orange scales and a much more primal look overall. Mega Charizard stared at the Mirage Darkrai like it was a piece of meat, and flew into the air with a bellowing roar. He tackled the Pokémon into the wall.

Ash used the distraction to run to Ritchie's side. Pikachu was already there beside him.

"Ritchie!" He winced when he saw the new, bloody injuries that were created or reopened. "Shit. We're going to get you some help, I promise."

"Ash?" Ritchie looked up at him, confusion lacing through his blue eyes. A moment later, they went wider. "Ash!" He tried to sit up, but struggled and almost fell back down.

Ash quickly grabbed him so that he was holding Ritchie up. "Take it easy."

"No, Ash, you gotta know—." Ritchie coughed, red droplets spraying on his hand that he used to cover it. "They're making—they're making an Arc—."

"An Arceus, I know," Ash assured him. He hesitated before pressing his hand over Ritchie's chest and closing his eyes. The injuries that were interrupting the natural flow of his Aura made Ash cringe. There were just so many that were just so deep. He took a deep breath and focused, willing his Aura to try and heal his friend despite the fact that he knew some of these were beyond his abilities.

"What are you—?"

"I can heal," Ash answered. He didn't know why, but he got the sudden urge to explain himself, even if there was the chance that the Mirage Yung could hear (no doubt the real Yung was watching too). "We can stop them, Ritchie. That's what we're trying to do. We can end all of this." Ritchie's aura was doing something both strange and alarming. It was fluctuating between being barely and not there at all. "That's why you gotta hold on, okay?"

"You can stop them?" Ritchie repeated.

"Yeah. We're taking this whole prison down right now."

"But you'll stop everything, right?" Ritchie's eyes were so desperate, that Ash had to nod his head. "Good. I want you to. You gotta promise me you'll try as hard as you can, alright?"

"I promise. Just hold on and you'll see it." Ash couldn't heal his wounds fast enough. It seemed like for every one that he healed, two more appeared. He had used far too much of his Aura on things that now seemed frivolous in comparison.

"Isn't this sweet?" Yung's voice taunted from above them. Ash looked up as the Mirage Yung loomed over them. He held out a hand. "Why don't you—?"

"Why don't you take a step away from him?" Cynthia's voice broke through the darkness. Beside her, her Mega Garchomp loomed angrily. Darkrai and Charizard flew back into view, startling her a bit. "Garchomp!" Her own mega roared in response and entered the fray. "Yung!" Her face faltered as she watched his face change to Cyrus and back. "You're really a Mirage too."

Ash turned his attention back to Ritchie, who closed his eyes and took a deep, shaky breath. "Do you remember our league battle?"

"Don't—."

"Do you?"

"How could I forget?"

"It was stupid, wasn't it? They should have let you switch your Pokémon at least. It was pretty obvious something wonky was up. It was stupid." Ritchie opened his eyes again. "If there's a place after this life, I wanna be your first battle there when you show up, alright?"

"No!" Ash shook his head, focusing his energy more. It wasn't easy, since he was also sharing with Charizard to keep his Mega form while he fought. And why were his eyes so watery? "We'll battle once you get better here."

"If my mom's okay, I'd like my Pokémon to go back with her. I left them with the others."

"You're going to be fine," Ash said desperately. Why weren't these wounds healing?

"You're a good friend Ash," Ritchie muttered. "I'm glad I got to meet you. You make people better, you know that? Never doubt it, alright? I believe you can do this. I know you can." He paused. "We'll battle someday soon." He closed his eyes.

"Ritchie?" Ash asked, his voice catching in his throat as he watched Ritchie's aura vanish.

"Ritchie!" Tears streaked down his cheeks. "No, no, no! I can heal you! You need to come back!" No matter how much of his own powers he tried to pour over into Ritchie, nothing happened or changed.

Something rose up in Ash's chest. It was anger and despair and so much more all mixed together in one unpleasant feeling. He rocked back and forth, holding his friend's body as a sob burst out of him.

Cynthia cried out in alarm at the energy that exploded from Ash. She could feel the horrified grief, guilt and so much more that was woven into it. Garchomp managed to grab her, but they both slammed into the wall. Likewise, Charizard managed to catch Pikachu, protecting the small Pokémon from the wave of power. Mirage Darkrai and Yung were tossed into the air, breaking apart into little pieces of data and vanishing.

She slowly looked up as the energy ebbed. Ash was in the same spot, seemingly unaware of what he had just done. His miserable sobs, combined with the image of him holding his friend's body, forced her to look away. Even as a Champion, there was only so much she could take.

Cynthia closed her eyes, and a tear fell down her cheek.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time!

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The Pieces Left Behind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The gravel crunched under Dawn's boots as she walked across the rocky beach, looking at the different groups of survivors. Her dark blue eyes darted from face to face, trying to find her mother. Despite the fact that she had yet to find the woman, she didn't lose hope. A lot of people had already been moved off of Newmoon Island, and in a way, Dawn hoped her mother was one of those people. She didn't want her on this place anymore.

The optimism coming from the people that were still on the island certainly helped her stay optimistic. Their victory was a huge one against Team Galactic. No, not just them, but against Team Rocket too. That thought alone made a small smile rise up on her lips.

She was about to turn and go down another path when she saw a familiar figure sitting on one of the rocks that jutted out over the ocean. Her smile slowly vanished, twisting into a frown as she made her way over to him.

Shifting Piplup so that he was sitting on her shoulder rather than in her arms, she carefully climbed over the rocks towards him. "Paul?" He ignored her, staring out over the ocean. "Paul? Are you o—?" She gasped as her feet slipped out from under her. Piplup jumped, landing on the rocks evenly, but Dawn kept going backwards.

Paul shot forward and grabbed her arm and pulled her back. She stumbled forward and grabbed onto his arm to steady herself. "Thanks!" She shrank back a bit at his fierce glare, letting go of his arm. "What's wrong?" She felt her stomach twist. "Is Reggie...?"

"He was one of the ones airlifted away," Paul growled, his hands curling into fists. "Poisoned and Ketchum's pathetic Lucario busted the wall he was by so even if he lives he'll probably never walk again."

Dawn took a couple steps back from him so she wasn't balancing precariously on the rocks. She thought for a moment. "Ria wouldn't do something like that on purpose. She—."

"Is just a Pokémon," Paul snapped as he turned to face her. "If Ketchum would have stuck to the plan we..." He trailed off.

Dawn felt her breath catch in her throat as she watched his grey eyes looked beyond her. Steeling herself, she slowly shifted to see what he was staring at, her heart dropping when she saw Ash. He was completely alone, even Pikachu wasn't there, just staring blankly up at the ruined prison. "Don't—!" It was too late. Paul stormed by her, heading towards him. "Stop!" She ran after him, trying to grab his arm, but he pulled away from her and kept going. Paul was absolutely furious, and there was something about Ash's posture that put her on edge.

She looked around wildly, scooping Piplup into her arms again as she started running.

...

When Serena found May sitting at the edge of the shore, she wasn't quite sure how to approach the younger girl. She had such a faraway look in her eyes as she hugged her knees to her chest.

"May?" Serena's whisper could barely be heard over the waves, but the other girl shifted slightly, signifying that she heard. "Are you okay?"

May pulled her legs closer to her chest and shook her head. Serena moved so that she was sitting beside her, frowning when she saw the tears staining May's cheeks.

They silently sat together, two sets of blue eyes staring out over the murky ocean. Serena's attention snapped to May again as the girl shifted. "I almost did something terrible." The blonde didn't say anything, but was paying rapt attention, so May kept going. "They were helpless and I was going to—I wanted my Pokémon to kill them?" Her lip trembled. "How could I even think of doing that to my Pokémon?" She looked down at the rocks they were sitting on. "I'm no better than them."

Serena reached out, setting a hand on her shoulder. "You are better, because you didn't do it."

"Only because Dawn stopped me!" May jumped up to her feet, crossing her arms in front of her as she glared at the ocean. "I was going to get my Pokémon to do something horrible, and you know, they would have done it for me. I—I'm just like all the bad guys who force their Pokémon to do horrible things." Her shoulders slumped. "It would have been better if you didn't save me on the train."

"No!" Serena jumped to her feet, and May stumbled back, surprised by her furious voice. "No, you do not get to say that! You are a good person May!"

"But Drew would—."

"Forget what Drew would want!" That exclamation startled even her. "You...you're still here. You are you May." Serena shook her head. "It took me a long time to realize that someone else doesn't define who I am, but they can influence you. So...don't think about what Drew would want you to do anymore. It's going to make you miserable. Think about who you want to be."

"So I just forget about him?" May sounded far more distressed than angry.

Serena faltered a bit. "No. Of course not. No. I...others can influence you, they can make impacts on your life, but in the end, it's still yours. You are the one that chooses, right? So you can keep your memories of Drew close, you can use them to motivate you, but that's not all you are."

"I don't know who I am right now," May admitted after a moment of tense silence. "I just...I don't want to be like them. I don't want to hurt anyone. I know Giovanni and all of the sick twisted people need to go away forever but—."

"Don't." Serena put her hands on May's shoulders, shaking her head. "Who says we have to even worry about that? There are other people in the world, right? Other people fighting. It's not just us." Even if it felt like that was exactly who they had become.

Tears welled up in May's eyes. "I wish...I wish I was strong like you, Serena. It just hurts so much." She bowed her head morbidly.

Serena stared at her, not quite sure how to react to that. She never associated herself with strength. She was about to protest, but stopped herself. Instead, she drew May close and hugged her. The younger girl clung to her, her shoulders shaking as she cried.

She didn't try to tell May that it would be okay. She didn't try to give any more advice. She just held the younger girl and let her cry and get all of her fears and frustrations out.

If her friend needed her to be the strong one, she could do that.

...

Misty tried not to look frantic as her gaze shifted from person to person. She tried not to run up to anyone with black hair. She especially tried to avoid looking at the covered bodies, dreading the fact that he might be under there.

In her travels, she had seen Zoey, Kenny, Barry, Lucas, Cynthia, and Johanna. On another section of the island, she had seen Serena and May sitting together, though she left them alone. Gary was helping treat a few people as best as he could, but it was hard with their limited resources. They were shipping people off to trusted hospitals as quickly as they could but it wasn't enough.

Misty felt a bit guilty for not helping, but she had been so distracted that Gary told her to go. She wasn't doing anyone any good there.

It might have been selfish of her, but Misty had already accepted that part of herself. Her entire motive for coming on this journey was selfish.

Sea-green eyes looked around until they landed on a familiar blond and brunette. She quickly approached them, but slowed down when she got closer. Clemont was kneeling in front of Leaf, who was just staring at the ground blankly. He had a cloth in his hand and was trying his best to wipe blood off of her.

Misty felt her stomach twist as she took in the blood splatter on Leaf's clothes and across her skin. Her arm was bandaged and wrapped tightly, but it was her vacant scare that frightened the redhead the most.

For a moment, she forgot about Ash and her selfish desire to find him. She knelt on the ground beside Clemont. "What happened?"

He winced. "I couldn't get the power off in time and a lot of people...a lot of people died. And Leaf—." Clemont shook his head. "She fought with a grunt that was in the room with us. Her Beartic is badly injured. We already gave it to one of the Nurse Joys that are here. The woman had a gun and—I could have helped but I just...I should have."

"No," Leaf suddenly whispered, startling him. Misty took it as a sign that she hadn't said anything in a while. "No, you did the right thing." Her head snapped up so she was staring at Misty. "I killed her. I took her gun from her and I shot her before she could shoot me again." Tears welled in her eyes. "I killed her."

"I'm sorry," Clemont repeated, bowing his head. "I should have helped more."

"No," she said again. Without any hesitation, Leaf leaned over and put her head on his shoulder. Clemont was more than a bit startled by this. "I'm glad you didn't see. At least—at least I could save one of us." She choked down a sob, hiding her face in her friend's sleeve as her tears fell.

Misty reached forward, putting her hand on Leaf's shoulder, careful not to jerk it. "Do you want me to get Gary?" She knew that Gary and Leaf's relationship was still only new, but Misty always felt a little bit better when she was upset and Ash was with her. He was the one person that she knew wouldn't judge her.

"No. I don't want him to see me like this. Please I just..." She stifled another sob.

Misty and Clemont exchanged sad glances. When Misty first met Leaf, she had been a bit lost but was strong in her own way, doing her own thing and not letting others push her around. She grew into this Leaf that always made it clear that she was strong and she knew it. She always claimed that they'd do what they had to do to win. Saying it and doing it were two entirely different things, something that most people failed to understand.

"Misty!" All three of them jumped and looked around. Dawn ran towards them, holding Piplup in her arms, a terrified expression on her face. "Misty, you need to come now!"

"What's wrong?" Misty scrambled to her feet, her heart already racing again.

"It's Ash and Paul! Paul's furious and Ash is—there's something wrong and I just—I know what they were like before but this is different and you have to help stop it!"

"Show me," Misty told her. Dawn nodded and spun around, running back in the direction she came from, the older girl following her closely.

...

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Paul raged as he drew closer to Ash. The only inclination that he was given to indicate that Ash was listening was the fact that his head tilted just slightly. Paul growled when the other boy didn't even look at him, storming around so that they were looking at one another.

"You were supposed to help me with the prisoners!"

Ash slowly regarded him, almost like he was surprised that Paul was actually there. "I know, I sent Ri—."

"No! You listen to me! I don't give two flying *fucks* if you're this mighty Chosen One or not! We had a plan! We went over that plan a hundred times! Hell, you helped come up with that plan!" A part of Paul knew that he was overreacting. Though it was a hard concept to truly grasp, he knew there was validity to Ash's claims that they needed the orbs. The majority of him didn't care about that. He needed someone to blame aside from himself. Someone that wasn't an evil mastermind hidden away somewhere else. Someone tangible. Ash was just the easy target.

Ash's brow furrowed, his blank face shifting into an annoyed one. "I know it was my idea. I just assumed—."

"Assumed," Paul interrupted. "You assumed and now a lot of people you could have saved are dead! My brother is probably going to die!" Ash faltered at that. "You didn't think about the consequences, did you? You never do! It's all just what you want to do because you're some

Chosen One, right?"

Ash's hand curled into a fist and his voice got louder as he spoke. "I have to—!"

"Do you even care about the people that died? Probably not! You just care about you—."

Ash's fist swung up, cutting Paul off as he slammed it into his face. Paul stumbled but managed to catch himself. At first, he was shocked, but rage replaced that quickly. He looked back at Ash, and maybe if the other boy looked stunned by his own actions, he wouldn't have done anything else. Ash wasn't stunned though. He looked livid and ready for bloodshed.

Paul swung back, satisfaction running through him when he saw Ash's nose start to bleed. That didn't last long as Ash basically tackled him to the ground.

"Stop it!" Dawn's voice shrieked from somewhere above them. "Ash! Paul!"

"Dawn! Get away from them!" Misty yelled. Ash had Paul pinned, so he could see the redhead as she appeared behind Ash. She lurched forward to grab the arm that Ash was using to punch him at the same time he swung it back. She grunted as he accidentally elbowed her.

The fact that Ash didn't notice is what set alarm bells off in Paul's head. Not the physical pain. Not the uncharacteristic rage on Ash's face. It was the fact that Ash didn't even acknowledge that he accidentally hit his girlfriend.

She seemed to realize this too. Some people might have called out a Pokémon to deal with this, but not Misty. She was so fed up with the fighting and everyone was so tired. So she tackled Ash sideways. They both hit the small patch of grass that was by them with a grunt, and Paul scrambled to his feet. His face bloody and sore all over.

Misty got up, ignoring the pain in her stomach from where she got hit. She shifted closer to Ash, who was kneeling on his hands and knees, staring at the ground. She was more than a little alarmed. Something was seriously wrong with him.

"Huh?" She looked down at the grass below her, watching as the green swiftly changed to yellow as it started to wither and die before her eyes. Misty's brow furrowed, but then she saw it. The visible glow that was appearing around Ash's hands as his fingers grasped the ground below him, like he was ripping the energy from the plants themselves. Misty's heart sunk when she realized that was exactly what was happening.

Paul approached, despite the fact that Dawn was urging him to stop. The young teenager grabbed his arm and tried to drag him back, but his silver eyes were locked onto Ash.

A barely visible twitch of his arm was the only warning Misty got. "No!" She lurched forward, once again grabbing Ash's arm as he jerked it up. The Aura Sphere that he had created jerked off of its projected trajectory, skimming the skin of Paul's cheek and flying up, slamming into the side of the prison.

It was still strong enough to send Paul to the ground, clutching his cheek that was burned from the energy. His heart raced when he realized that Misty had saved him from a world of hurt. If that had hit him, it would have caused a lot of damage.

"Stop!" Misty moved on her knees so that she was directly in front of Ash. She ignored the blood and faint glow on his hands as she grabbed them. "It's okay. Calm down. It's okay." She wondered if he could feel how rapidly her heart was beating.

Ash stared at her blankly before slowly blinking. Confusion marred his features. "Misty?" She nodded her head and watched as he looked at everyone behind her until his gaze fell onto Paul.

Ash suddenly jerked away from her and to his feet. Misty leapt up, terrified for a moment that he was going to go after Paul again. Instead, he stumbled back away from them, staring for only a moment before he turned on his heel and ran.

Misty hugged herself as she watched him flee, but she didn't run after him. She had no clue what to say or do. The only thing she did know is that she would never forget what she saw in his eyes before he sprinted away.

She saw the moment that Ash finally gave in to the pressure and crumbled.

...

The ocean air was bitterly cold, causing goosebumps to rise up on Ash's arms. He didn't notice it though. He stared down at the grey, churning waters, and for a moment, contemplated how easily it would be to just fall in. He was a decent swimmer, but not strong enough to fight currents here. All he would have to do was shift a little closer to the edge and not hold on as he slipped from the wet rocks.

"If there's a place after this life, I wanna be your first battle there when you show up, alright?"

A sob erupted from Ash's throat and his hands, still covered in dried blood, gripped his hair, pulling at it. His shoulders shook and he muttered, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

He heard the crunch of the rocks underneath her boots before Ash felt or saw her distinctive, bright yellow aura. Normally it was the other way around but he didn't really care.

Misty knelt beside him, gently prying his hands from his hair. He resisted at first, but eventually let her take his gloves off, actually tossing them off the side of the cliff. She produced a wet cloth and gently started rubbing the dried blood off his hands.

"He's dead," Ash muttered, though she didn't prompt anything from him.

Her sea-green eyes glanced up from his hands. "Who is?"

"Ritchie," he choked out. "He—they tried to get him to tell them—it was all about me. All because of me and I couldn't—I couldn't heal him." Ash suddenly jerked back away from her, stumbling a few steps away before he doubled over and dry heaved. There was nothing left in him to throw up anymore.

Misty was sat his side without hesitation. She rubbed his back as he breathed heavily.

After a moment, Ash tried to talk. "I—."

"Don't you dare apologize." He straightened up and looked at her a bit skeptically, opening his mouth to speak. Misty held up her hand. "No. Not about Ritchie. Not about what happened with Paul. Not about knocking me in the middle of it. Nothing. Do you hear me?" Her harsh expression softened. "Arceus, you're shaking."

"I'm fine."

She reached out and grabbed his hands again, and that was when he noticed just how badly he was shuddering. His stomach twisted painfully, his heart pounding against his chest. Misty shook her

head. "You don't have to be okay, you know that, right?"

Ash stared down at the ground, trying to contain the sob that threatened to escape him. It was no use, and soon tears were streaking down his cheeks. Misty let go of his hand and pulled him into a hug. At first he resisted, tensing up and leaving his arms at his sides, but soon Ash found himself leaning on her, face buried into the fabric of her jacket, arms wrapped tightly around her.

"I can't do this," he choked out. "I can't. It's too much."

Misty bit her lip, not quite sure what to say. She ran one hand through his tangled hair, the other rubbing his back as she tried to sort out her own thoughts. Most of the others might not have seen this coming until recently, but Misty had a front row seat to Ash slowly getting chipped away. He was chosen to save the world, something he had done many times before. He was good at stopping catastrophes; he was good at saving the legendary Pokémon. Ash's natural kindness, courage and stubbornness made him the perfect person for that. He wasn't built for a war though.

Misty squeezed her eyes shut in order to ward off her own tears. None of them were built for this. Leaf was a mess because she was forced to do the unspeakable. From what she heard, May was all broken up because she almost had. Then there was Ash who couldn't save someone, who was probably blaming himself for every death on that island.

An urge welled up within Misty. She wanted to take Gyarados out of his Pokéball, find Pikachu, and drag him and Ash somewhere far away. To a region without any affiliation with the Pokémon League where they could hide in the little time their world had left. She wanted to go to a place where the deaths of her sisters and her unborn nephew might not haunt her as much. Away from Giovanni and all of the other teams. Away from everything.

She almost asked him. She opened her mouth to ask if he wanted to just run as far away, as quickly as they could. Misty was sure he'd say yes in this state. That was what stopped her. When this all started, Ash would have scoffed at the idea. He would have insisted they keep going. As he came around, he would just end up falling and breaking again since he wouldn't be able to forgive himself for running.

"We need to leave this island," Misty muttered. "Get everyone else and run. There's nothing else we can do here."

"Where?" Ash mumbled. Where would they go? What would they do? Misty was sure he didn't particularly care.

"Wherever we need to go."

"I...I don't think I can...I just..."

"Shh." Misty leaned away from him a bit so she could see his face. She reached between them, carefully pressing her finger to his lips. "We're not saving the world. We're just going to find a piece of glass."

"But that—."

"Just a piece of shiny glass," Misty stressed. "That's it. Nothing else. Do you think you can do that?"

"I couldn't save Ritchie," he whimpered.

"This is easier. Just picking up a piece of glass. That's it. And you'll never be alone again, I

promise." Maybe she couldn't be with him all the time, but Misty would damn well make sure that another person was. He still looked hesitant. "For me?"

"You?"

"Yeah." She slid her hand down his arm and intertwined their fingers. "I'm right here, right? We're not doing anything for Arceus anymore. We're just...going to get some glowing glass balls for me."

Ash stared at her. He was still shaking. He was still utterly lost. Misty expected him to say no, so she was incredibly surprised when he slowly nodded his yeah. "For you."

Misty felt a sudden weight on her shoulders. He trusted her, and that was probably what he was clinging to. It was a terrifying thought.

However, if he could keep strong for everyone up until then, she could stay strong for him when he needed it.

Ash's body tensed. He jerked away from her and looked over towards the ocean. Slowly, he stood up and took a few steps forward.

"What is it?" Misty whispered as she stood beside him, taking his hand into hers.

"Giratina."

"Gira..." Misty trailed off as a familiar cry echoed through the air. A moment later, the massive Pokémon appeared over the ledge of the cliff, having come from a portal in the ocean. His red eyes focused on them intently. "Giratina."

...

Dawn's eyes lit up happily as she finally found her. There, looking exhausted but wonderfully alive was her mother. Johanna hadn't noticed her yet, and a part of Dawn was glad. She didn't want her mother to see how overwhelmed she was. She wanted to compose herself after everything that had happened.

Giratina's haunted cry echoed throughout the island. Dawn instantly recognized it, shivering at the sound. Others around her all looked alarmed, because none of them would know what it was.

Dawn turned around, looking back at the looming prison. She couldn't see Giratina, so the Pokémon must have been on the other side of it. That was where Ash had run earlier.

She gasped as she realized what it probably meant. There were few reasons a legendary Pokémon that was completely safe would dare take the journey to their world, and she got a feeling that she knew what it was.

Looking back towards her mother, Dawn bit her lip. The wind blew her hair into her face as she shifted back and forth on her feet.

"You're going to go with him, aren't you?" Paul's voice startled her. Dawn looked over her shoulder as he walked up beside her, his face bruised with a small burned spot from his altercation with Ash earlier.

"You could come too, if you wanted."

Paul snorted. "I'm sure Ketchum would love that." He focused his grey eyes on the people in front

of them. "I wouldn't want to anyway. I don't want to chase after stories."

"You know it's real."

"So are the people right there." He nodded down. "We saved these people and that's what I'm going to keep doing." Paul glanced down at her. "You know you're not obligated to go anywhere, right?"

Dawn slowly nodded her head. "I know, but I need to." She couldn't explain it, but something was willing her to go with them. She was well aware of the dangers. She had seen firsthand how poor, sweet May erupted into violence and then crumbled into defeat and regret. She had seen strong-willed Leaf rendered to an almost waking-comatose state from her own actions. She had seen Ash, the strongest person she knew, get crushed under the pressure. "You know, I think that's why I need to go." They needed someone who could be optimistic when no one else could. If there was anyone right for the job, it was her.

"It's stupid," Paul warned her.

"What you're going to do is just as dangerous," she pointed out. Dawn looked down at Piplup, who was silently standing at her feet, just staring out over the people. She picked him up and cuddled him close. "Reggie would be proud."

"Reggie might not be anything right now," Paul snapped at her.

Mentally cursing, because of course that was a sore topic, Dawn tried to clear things up. "I—I know. I didn't mean—I just..."

"You don't understand. Your mother is right there. She's fine. You don't have a brother."

"You're right, I don't," Dawn agreed after a moment. "But if Reggie was running into a dangerous situation, you'd want to help him too, right? Ash, my friends, they're my family too."

Silent fell between the two of them.

"If you're going, you should get out of here before she spots you. Any good mother would make you stay."

Dawn slowly nodded her head. She knew that he was right. As much as she wanted to run to her mother, hug her and curl up in her arms, she knew she'd never leave if she did.

Johanna's dark blue eyes turned towards them, locking with her own. Relief and joy sprouted on the woman's face, and Dawn weakly smiled back. "I'm sorry." Though too far away to hear her, Johanna seemed to understand, worry replacing relief.

Dawn turned away from her mother and looked at Paul. "Good luck."

"I'm not the one who's going to need it." She slowly nodded her head and took a few steps away from him. "Dawn?" She looked back up. "Stay alive."

It was a grim thing to say, but she understood. Though Paul was four years older than her, in that moment she felt like she truly understood him. "You stay alive too." With that, she walked away from him, from her Sinnoh friends, and from her mother. What she was walking towards, Dawn had no clue, but she wasn't going to back down.

She might be young, but she could be the voice of optimism the group desperately needed.

...

At some point in time, Serena ended up leaving May with Leaf while she checked on Clemont. The two brunettes sat together, staring out over the water. For the longest time, neither one of them said a word. Once everyone else was out of earshot though, that was when May spoke up.

"Ash was right." Leaf slowly looked at her as the young teenager clarified what she meant. "We can't play judge, jury and executioner. I wanted to do it. I wanted to kill that person because he was everything that's wrong with this in my mind. I'm—I'm glad Dawn stopped me." She shook her head.

"I did it," Leaf replied, speaking in a matter-of-fact tone. "She shot Beartic. She was going to kill Clemont. She enjoyed the pain that the poor people in the prison were going through." She slowly shook her head. "So we fought. We fought and it was either she died or I did and then after me it would have been Clemont."

"It was self-defense," May pointed out. Her voice was still so quiet that nobody else could have heard it if they tried.

"It was," Leaf agreed, smiling bitterly, "and I still hate myself for it. I thought I could handle it if I had to." She shook her head again and looked at May. "I'm glad you didn't do it. This...this disgusting feeling of knowing what I am might fade but I'm not sure that would have."

By 'that', May knew that Leaf meant intentionally killing someone in cold blood. "It makes us just like them."

"It would," Leaf corrected. "You did the right thing and that makes you a good person."

"A good person wouldn't think that," May said bitterly. Tears welled in her eyes and her voice caught in her throat. "I just...the people there were suffering and I kept picturing Drew and...it's too much."

Leaf opened her mouth to speak when she heard a familiar cry. Her head snapped around, and she jumped to her feet in a motion that startled Serena, Clemont and Gary, who were talking quietly away from them.

"What was that?" Serena asked as she slowly approached them, staring in the direction the noise came from. "It sounds familiar."

"Giratina," Gary answered, walking up beside Leaf. "I'd recognize it anywhere."

"Me too," Leaf agreed. Slowly she reached out, holding Gary's hand tightly.

"What do you think he wants?" Serena asked, glancing over at Clemont.

He shook his head. "No idea, but I think we should follow them and see." He pointed in front of them, where Dawn was hurrying around the side of the prison, Piplup and Pikachu following closely.

...

Cynthia heard Giratina's cry and assured everyone around her that it was okay. She knew what it was, but didn't want to make anyone panic. Mirage Pokémon weren't widely known, and most people still thought it was the legendary Pokémon themselves siding with the Teams.

Her hand ghosted over Garchomp's Pokéball as she walked towards the source of the noise, the wind whipping her long, black jacket behind her dramatically. Cynthia wasn't afraid, but she knew to be cautious. Even if they weren't helping Team Rocket, legendary Pokémon were unpredictable.

She came to a stop as she rounded the prison, taking in the scene slowly. Giratina was hovering at the edge of a cliff, with several young adults around him. They all looked beaten and battered, some more than others.

Giratina's eyes looked towards her as she slowly approached, and Cynthia repressed a shudder. The Sinnoh Myths and the legends surrounding the Creation Trio always fascinated her, and seeing one of them was always amazing. Giratina held the power to destroy that entire island and more before they could even think to stop it. She was glad that they weren't on Team Rocket's side.

"What's going on?" Cynthia asked the group as she approached them. Her eyes flickered to Ash for an answer, but he kept his focus on the ground.

Misty squeezed his hand comfortingly and looked at the Champion. "Giratina wants to help us. He's going to take us to the next orb. It's not in Sinnoh."

"Well, that's certainly one way to get around trying to sneak into another region," Cynthia replied after a moment of contemplation.

"You're not going to stop us?" Gary asked her.

"No." Her eyes flickered to Ash briefly. "Others might not understand, but I know you have to go." She glanced at May and Leaf. "You're welcome to stay. I won't force you into anymore fights."

The two girls glanced at one another before slowly shaking their heads.

"We're all here for a reason," Dawn spoke up. "So we need to go. Together."

Oddly enough, Cynthia didn't doubt her. It was hard to let go, knowing that the true fate of the world, no matter how hard everyone else fought, was in the hands of a group of teenagers. Very capable teenagers, she reminded herself. Cynthia almost immediately amended the thought back to just teenagers, because this was far too much to ask of any of them.

Dawn was probably right though. They were probably meant to go together.

"I can't tell you what any of the other regions are like, but I do know Team Galactic was their own form of messed up. Take care of each other and stick to your mission." She then looked at the legendary Pokémon that waited patiently. "Take care of them."

Giratina cooed lightly, and though it too sounded morbid, Cynthia still felt comforted. This Pokémon was only here to help.

Giratina lowered his head, and slowly, the teenagers all climbed on. It wasn't lost on Cynthia that Ash resisted a bit, though Misty tugged him along after her. His brown eyes met hers briefly, and Cynthia suppressed a shudder. They were so different than what she had seen before going to the prison.

Giratina hovered in the air for a moment before swooping down towards the water. Cynthia rushed to the edge of the cliff and watched them disappear into a portal that closed behind them until only the ocean was left.

She took a deep breath. "Good luck."

The world was counting on them.

...

The first time Ash went to the Distortion World, it was hard to look at. The Aura there was so powerful that it blinded him even when his eyes were closed. He could feel Ria's discomfort emanating from her Pokéball, but Ash did nothing to sooth her. Instead, he kept his head on Misty's shoulder because at least it helped dim some of the brightness. He held Pikachu close to him, taking in the additional comfort the Pokémon offered him.

To everyone else though, the Distortion World looked bleak and grim. This was especially true for those that had seen it before.

"What is that?" Serena asked, reaching out towards the dark smoke that congregated in heavy clouds.

"Don't touch it!" Dawn cried out, and Serena jerked her arm back. "It's poisonous. Whenever something goes really wrong in our world, when things get really out of whack, that poison appears here."

"Destruction in our world, destruction here," Clemont summarized. "I guess that makes sense if this world reflects our own."

"Yeah, and things that happen here change things there," Dawn added with a nod of her head.

"You've been here before." It wasn't a question since Clemont was already certain of the answer.

"With Ash, Misty, Leaf and Brock." Dawn's smile faded, as she looked towards her other friends. Her shoulders slumped. "We told you before that Shaymin poisoned Misty. She almost died here. Ash and Leaf, and Brock, were the ones to bring her back and help her. Now..." She shrugged. Now she didn't even know if Ash was conscious, he hadn't lifted his face from the safety of Misty's hair and jacket for a while. Leaf was over beside Gary, just staring at the world blankly. At least she seemed to be thinking. May had somehow fallen asleep, her head leaning on Serena's leg.

"I want to know where we're going," Gary spoke up, able to hear their conversation. "I know Ash said that Giratina wanted to take us to the next orb, but where is that?"

"It can't be any worse than Sinnoh," Leaf muttered bitterly.

"You'd think," he replied dryly. Gary wanted to believe that they had seen the worst, but given that it was just the beginning, he was starting to doubt that. Leaf didn't say anything to that, she just looked down and ran her fingers along Giratina's strange skin, solid and ghostly at the same time.

Gary frowned as he watched her. He wasn't quite sure what he could do to help Leaf at all. He didn't want to see her so sad and down. The day before, she had been ready to lead them through hell, to step up and take some of the responsibility that they had quietly tossed onto Ash. Gary almost snorted as he remembered back to when he said he was going to be the leader. Things seemed so simple back then.

He looked over towards Misty. She rubbed Ash's shoulder as he leaned on her and cuddled Pikachu close, muttering something that Gary couldn't hear but her boyfriend clearly did. He didn't understand how she understood what to do to keep him calm.

Shaking his head slightly, Gary realized how ridiculous his internal thoughts sounded. Now wasn't the time to think about relationships of all things. Now was the time to check the damage and to

assess how to move forward. He could do that.

His eyes slid over to May, who was asleep by Serena. He added her to the list of the wounded in his mind. The worst physical wound was where the bullet grazed Leaf's arm, but the mental wounds were deep.

Gary tensed up. Ash had been their leader all along, and Leaf had recently stepped up, but they were both down and out. Quickly, his green eyes darted from person to person. Serena was growing in strength, able to be an emotional support, but she wasn't a leader in this type of thing. Clemont had the intellect but he wasn't gung-ho to take the lead, especially since he seemed fairly down too, just not as much as the others. Dawn was full of optimism and fight still, and that was something no one wanted to see crushed. That left him and Misty.

He bit his lip. Once, he would have jumped on the opportunity to be the boss, but he wasn't sure if he could. He was good at strategy, and he was a strong battler, but he was almost most comfortable in a right-hand-man sort of way. He wasn't sure about Misty. She had it in her to lead. She had the strength and the will to do it, but it was obvious that she had a personal mission. If Gary was honest with himself, he was pretty sure that Misty would pick Ash over everyone else if push came to shove, and that type of person wasn't what they needed to move forward.

Giratina's soft cry echoed around them. He shifted a bit, looking around and trying to see beyond the dense, black clouds. If they were almost to their destination, there was no way for any of them to know. Though some of them had bits and pieces of knowledge about this place, it still didn't help much.

That's when it hit him. Gary almost laughed at the simplicity of the idea but there it was. They still needed Ash. They needed to help him (and the others) get back to their feet and to make sure they didn't break apart again. In the meantime, all of them would have to work together, using their combined strengths. It would be messy, but it was the only way things were going to work.

...

Giratina started flying downwards, the poisonous mist dispersing away from them as he flew by it. Finally, they broke through the dark barrier, only to see what looked like an island on a thin, crystal pedestal.

"I thought we were going to get an orb in another region," Serena said as she leaned forward to get a better look. They were definitely flying towards it. The island itself didn't have much for resources, being mostly made of rock and scattered gemstones, but there was an eerie white mist lingering in the middle of it.

"Giratina never said it was in another region," Clemont replied as he thought about it. "The only other ghost-type legendary is Hoopa, but if they wanted to hide these orbs from Arceus, to protect them..."

"What better place to put one than in another world?" Dawn finished his thought for him. "That's smart."

Giratina landed on the island, just outside of the barrier of mist. He lowered his head, allowing everyone to slip off one by one. He then cooed to the mist. A dark figure appeared in the fog, just out of sight.

Pikachu's ears twitched and Ash slowly looked up. "Mewtwo."

"What?" Dawn asked him.

"Who?" Gary toned in at the same time.

Both questions were answered as the mist was shoved aside and a tall, white and purple creature appeared in sharp focus. His purple eyes took them in before they landed on Ash and Pikachu. "We were wondering when you'd come."

"We?" Misty asked him.

Mewtwo didn't answer, instead looking to Giratina. "I have kept it safe, just as you and Arceus wished."

Giratina nodded his head and suddenly took off back towards the sky.

"Wait a minute!" Clemont cried out, but the Pokémon didn't listen as he flew away. "What now?"

"Now, you come with me," Mewtwo explained.

"Go with you? We don't even know who you are!" Gary snapped. "I've heard of Mew, but not Mewtwo."

"You wouldn't have," Misty answered him. "He's an altered clone of Mew. Made to be more powerful than any other Pokémon."

"Cloned?" Gary repeated skeptically. "By who?"

"Yes," Mewtwo answered. "By my enemies. The same as yours. They created me and then didn't learn from their mistakes, creating only one other. Now they stick with Mirage Pokémon. Abominations more than I."

"Our enemies?" Gary was suddenly yanked back in time to when he was young. He had gone to the Viridian City Gym and was defeated by something. He would never forget the silhouette of the creature that destroyed him, and it occurred to him that he was looking at the same creature. "Team Rocket made you! How do we know you're not working with them?"

Clemont, Serena, Dawn and May took a step back. Leaf just stared at the Pokémon curious.

Misty shook her head and was about to answer, but Ash's oddly quiet voice beat her to it. "He's not."

"Because of his Aura?" Serena guessed.

"Because they tried to hurt him before too."

Mewtwo narrowed his eyes at Ash, seeing right through him with ease. "You as well. Come, this place is safe for now."

They all glanced at one another. Ash was staring off after Mewtwo, though he wasn't moving, not making eye contact with any of his friends.

Misty huffed angrily. "Let's just go. We're on this island anyway." She grabbed Ash's hand and tugged him along with her as she followed Mewtwo. Ash didn't even try to resist her and Pikachu scampered up onto his shoulder.

"Wait!" Dawn took a few steps forward and grabbed Ash's other hand. "Let's make a chain so no

one gets lost and wanders off the edge of the island or anything." She reached her free hand out to May. May held on to Clemont, Clemont held onto Leaf, Leaf held onto Serena and Serena held onto Gary, forming a long line of people with Misty in the lead.

Slowly, they walked into the mist.

At first, Misty was cautious, just waiting to choke on something poisonous like the first time she had been in the Distortion World. Soon she realized it was legitimately just normal mist, and she relaxed just slightly. Her sea-green eyes stayed focused on Mewtwo's form, blurred by the fog.

"What is this place?" Serena asked as she walked away from them.

"For now, we simply call this place the Safe Haven," Mewtwo explained. "Giratina has been searching the world for legendary Pokémon that may fall victim to the Teams or frightened people and bringing them here if they wish to come. Arceus charged me and my female counterpart to protect this place while Giratina is gone." His violet eyes flickered over to Misty. "He didn't want me encountering him."

Him. Giovanni. Misty looked over at the creatures that were milling around. She had never seen so many legendary Pokémon in her life. A small smile appeared on her face as she saw several Latias and Latios fly by, chasing one another.

Ash looked up suddenly. He scrunched his face, and without any warning, took off through the groups of Pokémon.

"Pikapi!"

"Ash!" Misty cried out, running after him with Pikachu clinging to her shoulder. She could hear the others calling out for her as they followed. They gained the curious glances of many legendary Pokémon as they ran, but Misty tried to ignore it.

She only caught up to Ash when he stopped and she almost slammed into him. Able to stop himself just in time, she scowled and was going to demand he explain his actions, but the words died on her lips when she saw what he was staring at.

Rayquaza lifted her head from the ground where she was napping and looked at them. She nodded her head towards something.

Slowly, Ash took a few steps forward and looked at something. Misty gasped with alarm as he suddenly fell to his knees and was beside him almost instantly. She was about to ask what was wrong, but got her answer without needing to ask. Nestled safely against Rayquaza's side were two eggs that looked almost like a giant ruby and sapphire. There were markings etched into both of them.

"It's Kyogre and Groudon, Mist," Ash muttered, his eyes lighting up as he reached his hand out and placed it on top of the blue egg. "I don't..."

"Pikapi," Pikachu repeated, jumping onto the ground beside Ash. He placed his hand on top of Groudon's egg. "Pi pikachu pi pika."

"Alphas that are unique cannot breed, therefore when one passes on, they are reborn again," Mewtwo explained. He looked over his shoulder at something else approaching them, but everyone else was focused on the eggs.

"When you dove into the water in Sootopolis. You were getting these, weren't you?" Clemont

asked Rayquaza, who simply nodded her head.

"You didn't think we'd let the world end that easily, did you?" The voice that spoke to them was soft and amused, like a young girl was the one asking them questions.

"A Mew," Dawn breathed out in awe.

Mew hovered beside Mewtwo for a moment as she surveyed the group. She twisted around so that she was upside down, a playful action, but there was something about her bright blue eyes that put all of them on edge.

She straightened up and said, "You guys want a lot of answers but you need a lot of sleep." She floated through the air, stopping just beside Ash's kneeling form. "Though I guess I should give you guys something, huh?"

"You know what's happening?" May spoke up, suddenly curious. There was something about seeing Kyogre and Groudon's eggs that made her wake up a little bit. Both Pokémon were so important to her region, and knowing that they weren't permanently gone made a little bit of the pain fade away.

"Of course I do." Mew sounded almost insulted by the question.

"She's the original," Ash spoke up.

"The...original?" Leaf asked him.

Ash looked directly at Mew. "You were the one here from the beginning, weren't you?"

"Yes," Mew answered. "I was what everything began with, and I imagine I'll be the last thing to go too." She nodded her head as she flew around them. "I'm the Alpha Mew. I'll try to help you guys out in a bit but you really need to eat something okay?"

"But—."

"Food now, answers later." She vanished before their eyes.

"I would listen," Mewtwo spoke up, almost amused. "She can plant the idea in your minds if she wishes to."

None of them wanted a Pokémon playing around with their minds, so they all chose to drop their bags to the ground and go through their rations. Some of it had to be tossed away (only to be stolen by other Pokémon) since the waterproof bags broke, but most of it survived.

Once they stopped moving, in a relatively safe environment, the exhaustion hit the entire group. None of them had slept since before the assault on the prison. Most of them hadn't felt comfortable enough on Giratina to doze off, but this was different.

"Eat it," Gary insisted, pushing a packet of dried food into Leaf's hands as she yawned. "You can get some sleep after that."

"I'm fine," Leaf grumbled, though she accepted her rations. "I don't need you hovering."

"I just—."

"I killed someone, Gary," she snapped at him. "This is a war and it happens. I'll get over it." Leaf didn't know if she was lying or not. She just didn't want to see the pity on his face. It made her feel

weak.

Luckily, May didn't need to be urged into eating. Though she fell uncharacteristically silent, she took what was offered to her, eating it slowly so she didn't make herself sick.

Ash was another story all together. Misty stared with her pleading eyes, so he took the food from her. He only got a couple bites in before he stopped, his face going pale. He set the food down and shook his head.

"Come on, you need to eat it."

"No."

"Pikapi," Pikachu said, straightening up and glaring at his trainer. "Pikachu pi pika pikachu pika pika cha pika."

Ash just shook his head again. "I'm just not hungry."

If his actions weren't alarming enough already, that instantly put all of them on edge.

Mew floated over to them, hovering beside Ash. She tilted her head from side to side as she observed him. "Huh." She reached her tiny arm out, pressing her paw against his forehead.

"Huh wh..." Ash trailed off as his eyes closed and he slumped over.

Alarmed, Misty caught him. "What did you do?"

"He wasn't gonna eat, so I put him to sleep so he won't have nightmares," Mew explained in a calming voice. "It's never easy."

"You knocked him out pretty easily," Gary toned in sarcastically. Mew's long tail lashed out and smacked his face. "Ow!" He rubbed his cheek and glared, but his glare softened when he saw the genuinely amused look on Leaf's face.

"I mean it's never easy when people you care about die," Mew scolded him, and though her voice was childish, Gary still felt like he was being scolded by a teacher. Then again, this was Mew and she had been in physical existence longer than anything else.

"Who died?" Dawn asked.

Mew blinked. "You never bothered to ask what was wrong?" She looked back at Misty, who nodded her head as she shifted Ash so that he was lying comfortably on her lap. She then grabbed her food again and continued to eat because it wouldn't do her any good to avoid it. Not that she had much of an appetite, especially thinking about the fact that Ritchie was dead.

"I saw it," Mew explained. "He held his friend as his friend died. He tried to heal him but couldn't. The boy with brown hair and blue eyes. He was avoiding thinking of his name."

"Ritchie," Dawn gasped, slapping her hands over her mouth. "He—he tried to pretend to be Ash to get information and to get money so that we could feed everyone."

They all fell silent. No one outside of Misty had dared actually ask Ash was what wrong in fear that it would just make things worse.

None of them knew what to do at all anymore.

...

"Wakey wakey."

Ash groaned as he slowly blinked open his eyes. His neck and back were stiff and sore, but he didn't have the pounding headache or the nausea running through him. That was always a good thing.

He pushed himself up and looked around at his friends. All of them were sleeping peacefully, and he was a bit resentful. Why did he wake up again? His eyes lingered on Misty, who cradled Pikachu close to her.

"I wanted you to wake up. You can go back to sleep later." Ash turned to Mew. "I gotta go do something, and I figured you had some questions for me before I go. So up, up! We're going to walk and talk." She sniffed the air and made a face at him. "Well, maybe after you change those clothes at least."

Ash looked down at himself, grimacing when he realized that he still had his bloodstained jacket and pants on. Without a care about the other legendary Pokémon that were around, he took Mew's advice and quickly switched into another pair of jeans and his normal shirt.

Mew nodded her head. "Good. You'll still take care of yourself on your own a bit. Come on." It didn't occur to Ash that she was testing his mental state, but that was exactly what she was doing. "And don't worry about your friends, they'll be safe here!"

"They all seem so peaceful," Ash said, wincing at the sound of his own hoarse voice.

"Oh, I made sure they'd have dreamless sleeps. Did the same for you." She floated along and he followed her. "So, ask me some questions. It's why I got you up."

"How close are they to making a Mirage Arceus?" Ash asked after a moment of thought.

"Really close," Mew answered bluntly. "Too close, really."

Ash's shoulders slumped. "I don't think I can do it."

"Maybe you can't." That answer startled him a bit. In a way, Ash expected encouragement or urgency. Mew's voice sounded so accepting of the idea. "I always knew the world was going to end at some point in time. Now, in a hundred years, in a thousand, it doesn't really mean much to me. I'll be here when it's over because Arceus wants me to be." She paused. "Because if I'm still here, it means maybe life can find a way again."

"Mew, Aura is life energy, right?" She nodded her head. "I...don't understand it. I always just used mine and stuff around me in...waves? But earlier..."

"With everything else, it's basically just moving Aura. When you use your own you can go until your body stops you unless it's in a dire circumstance, like with Sir Aaron or Lucario. It's kinda like how you can hold your breath until you pass out but then you start breathing again." She looked down. "The other thing, when you ripped the Aura out of the grass – I saw it in your mind – that was taking it. That grass won't get its Aura back. It's gone. That...isn't the right way to use Aura. I mean, grass is one thing, but if that happens to a person or a Pokémon they'll die. So just be careful."

"So I am dangerous." Ash looked down at his hands mournfully.

Mew snorted. "Of course you are! So am I! So is a little baby Pichu that can't control it's static! Don't go beating yourself up about it. Not gonna help."

Ash looked down at the ground, but an excited cry startled him. He looked up just in time to catch a small creature that flew into his arms. He blinked a couple times before it registered who it was that he was holding. "Victini?"

"Tini ti!" Victini thrilled excitedly, nuzzling Ash's shoulder.

"I'm glad you're okay," he mumbled as he stroked the Pokémon's soft fur.

Victini looked up at Ash before frowning. "Tini ti."

Ash suddenly felt warmth washing over him. He closed his eyes, and for a brief moment, he felt like he could do anything. Opening his eyes again, he smiled slightly at the Pokémon. "Thank you. Wish I could take you with me. Safer here for you."

Victini flew out of his arms and smiled. He spoke to Mew quickly, and Mew nodded her head. "That's enough questions for now. He'll lead you the rest of the way to your destination. Just remember, I'm rooting for you."

"What?" Ash was incredibly confused. Victini caught his attention briefly by waving excitedly, and when he looked back to Mew again, the Pokémon was gone. "What's going on?"

Victini flew back to him and grabbed his hand, gently tugging him along. Warmth washed over Ash as he followed the little Pokémon along.

Luckily, they didn't have to go far to reach their destination. Giratina was lying on the ground, and looked up when they approached. He nodded and pushed himself off of the dirt, revealing what was hidden behind his large form.

Ash gaped in surprise at the shrine. It looked a lot like the other intact ones that he had seen, so he knew what was in there. He couldn't feel the orb here like he felt the other ones back in their world. The Aura was too overwhelmingly vibrant, so the orb's power just blended in with it.

Giratina nodded, and Victini continued to urge him along. Ash was reluctant as he walked forward. Unlike the other shrines, where the orbs were hidden farther back in them, he could already make out a faint, purple sphere. Slowly, he reached forward and pick it up. "Ghost?"

Giratina nodded, and then actually spoke to him. "I will take you from region to region from now on, but I cannot stay in that world permanently. I am needed here. When you need me, look into a mirror or the water, concentrate on me, and speak. I will find you."

"Why now?" Ash asked, feeling his headache starting to come back. He wondered why Giratina was offering this now and not before. If they could have gotten around easier, they could have been saved a lot of trouble. They might have even had all of the orbs!

Ash's shoulders slumped in defeat. Drew and Ritchie would probably be alive too.

Victini and Giratina both regarded him sadly. "Now, if I don't, it'll be too late."

Ash didn't even bother asking what he meant by 'it'. He already knew what was coming, and if Giratina was willing to put his safety on the line, it was coming a lot sooner than they dreaded it would.

...

The metal floor slid open with a swish as Giovanni walked into the room, his Persian walking beside him. He approached the man working at a control panel and said, "I was told that you wished to show me something. I hope this won't be a waste of my time."

"No, sir," Doctor Yung said to him. "You asked to be kept up to date on this project and I hit an important milestone today. Would you like me to show you? It'll take a few minutes."

"Yes."

Doctor Yung worked furiously at the computer, the lights flickering as he did. "That's one of the problems. We're still working on the energy issue but we'll have it fixed soon. This Pokémon is just so powerful and complex." Normally, Mirage Legendary Pokémon were hard to create and power, it was why every Team only got one. This wasn't just a normal one though. This was something different altogether and it thrilled Yung to no end.

"We knew this would happen," Giovanni said. "It will be worth it."

"It will," Yung agreed. The two men watched as glowing orange light began to take a form on the opposite side of the safety glass. A few moments later, it became a solid figure, sleeping on the floor.

Giovanni's eyes raked over the pure white fur and the golden wheel around it's middle, a delinquent smile rising up on his lips. The Mirage Pokémon started to open its eyes, but flickered out of existence a moment later.

"It's too strong right now, but we've given it a physical form based off of the memories of those two from the Michina Town ruins. It'll get easier and easier to create, especially with the new resources coming our way." Yung paused. "He'll be ready soon."

"Good," Giovanni said. He had been stressed with the fact that Lance continued to find new ways to pick away at his resources every day, putting up more of a fight than he expected at this point. With this, it didn't matter. Nothing else did.

In the end, no one would stand a chance against him.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Ready, Set, Run

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



She ducked down low in the bushes as a car streaked by, going at reckless speeds on a thin road with so many twists and turns. If someone were out on the paths, they'd get hurt for sure. Not that she expected anyone to be there.

Waiting until she was sure that the rumble of the vehicle was gone, Iris slowly stood up and peered at her surroundings cautiously. She wasn't about to run onto the road though. Others got lost without being guided by familiar landmarks, but not her. Iris knew how to navigate without any sort of equipment. All she needed was her Pokémon and her wits to survive.

It was the reason that she had been sent out on this small mission. They didn't have a massive group of people together, it was just a small one, but they got word of a Team Plasma base that was very close to them and wanted someone to check it out. If the rumours were true, they'd relocate somewhere else.

Most people weren't looking for a fight anymore.

Iris volunteered to go because she felt absolutely stir-crazy waiting around in a small cabin, doing nothing. The only person she actually knew from that group, her friend Cilan, had protested, insisting that he go along with her, but Iris declined his help.

Cilan was good at a lot of things, but being stealthy in the woods like she could be was not one of them.

She darted between trees, slipping through the shadows with a grace similar to a Deerling. Though her long, violet hair flew behind her, she moved so quickly that it was out of sight before anything could actually spy her.

It wasn't very hard to find the base that everyone was worried about, but when she did, she had to scoff. It was a two-story building mostly made of metal, but it looked run-down with absolutely no signs of recent life. Still, she approached cautiously, grabbing onto the vines that coated the side of it. She tugged at them, and deciding that they were able to hold her, she scaled up the side of the building. Peering into the broken window, she came face to face with a thick layer of dust. Careful

to avoid the shards of glass, Iris pulled herself up and through the window.

She jumped onto the floor and waited a moment, stretching to see if she could hear anything. There wasn't any sort of click or clang from anywhere, so she kept moving forward.

Iris checked every single room, moving cautiously at first, and then casually as she got through most of it. There was no one here and it was just an abandoned building. It was annoying that people were so paranoid, but it made sense. Too much had happened to make things like potential danger easy to overlook.

Iris couldn't help but feel a little bit of disappointment. A part of her had been ready and raring for a fight, but she wouldn't get that here.

She walked out of the building, not finding anything of interest in there. She breathed in deeply, enjoying the clear air over the musky, stale air of the house. Iris let her guard down, and wasn't prepared when one of the Pokéballs on the inside of her long sleeves started to shake.

"No!" Iris called out, but it was too late. The Pokéball exploded, revealing a large creature with three heads.

Hydreigon instantly started snarling and growling. Iris took a couple steps back from the irritated, volatile Pokémon. She kept her arms close to her, brown eyes focused on it. "Shh, shh, it's okay." All heads bared their teeth. It tensed up and Iris carefully grabbed another one of her Pokéballs. It lunged forward and she tossed the Pokéball.

Haxorous exploded into existence and tackled the other dragon. Though Hydreigon had three heads, Haxorous was much stronger.

"Don't hurt him!" Iris called to her Pokémon. She grabbed Hydreigon's Pokéball and managed to call it back, quickly making it so the Pokéball wouldn't open again. She sighed in relief and looked at Haxorous. "Are you alright?"

He nodded his head and walked over to her, leaning down to nuzzle her. Gone were the days when her little Axew could hide within her hair. Haxorous nudged her, and she climbed up onto her shoulder. Forgetting subtly, Haxorous started running.

"Don't go back right away!" Iris called out to her Pokémon. "Just go...somewhere." She didn't want to worry Cilan or anyone else that she was staying with, but she wanted to be free.

Iris looked up at the sky. As much as she loved the speed Haxorous could run at, she longed to fly through the sky. She tried on Dragonite before, but it wasn't quite that easy. Dragonite preferred to be upright, making it difficult for her to hang on and for him to move with her on his back.

Her hand brushed against Hydreigon's Pokéball, a frown crossing her features. She didn't like having to lock her Pokéball, a rather recent technology that put some people up in arms but was said to be for protection of the Pokémon. She was more inclined to side with the angry group, but that would mean siding with Team Plasma and she didn't want to do that in any way, shape or form even if there were a couple base ideas that were sound.

Haxorous started to slow as they approached a lake, settling on the ground beside it. Iris took a deep breath and sighed in relief at the taste of the clean air. Iris dipped her hands into the clear lake, taking a drink from it as Haxorous did the same.

That was when it started to ripple. It was subtle at first, she barely noticed it, but then the ripples started turning into very small waves, and that alarmed her. Jumping to her feet, Iris watched with

wide eyes. "Hurry, into the trees." Trainer and Pokémon both dashed into the trees, Haxorous giving her a boost up so she could hide within the safety of the branches while he pressed himself against the ground to be hidden by the shrubbery.

Iris watched with baited breath as a swirling vortex of energy suddenly shot out of the lake, creating a hole in it. A moment later, her mouth fell open as Giratina gracefully flew out of it, his streamlined body glowing and shifting until he had four feet that he firmly planted on the ground. Her body tensed, but she was more curious than worried. Iris knew dragon-Pokémon, and she had the distinct feeling that this one wasn't here to do harm, despite what people said about the legendary Pokémon these days.

A small part of her was mentally dancing because she was seeing Giratina, easily one of the most elusive dragon-type Pokémon ever.

Giratina lowered his head to the ground, and that was when Iris got the shock of her life. She didn't recognize three of the people that slipped off of his head, but others she knew well. That was when she was positive that she wasn't in any sort of danger.

Gracefully jumping out of the tree, Iris hit the ground lightly and rather silently. Only Giratina looked at her, and she felt a thrill of excitement when he did. Shaking her head slightly, Iris turned her attention towards the people and started walking towards them.

"Ash?"

Everyone jumped and looked at her, and Iris was surprised by how guarded most of them seemed. The three brunettes that she didn't know regarded her with curiosity and a bit of distrust, but everyone else instantly knew who she was.

"Iris?" Dawn asked, eyes widening with surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Not riding on a legendary Pokémon, that's for sure," she replied, looking up again at the Pokémon, unable to hide her awe. "I was taking a drink and then you guys just showed up!"

"Oh!" Dawn glanced up at Giratina. "He must have purposely brought us to you! That's helpful! Thank you!"

Iris turned her attention away from Giratina and towards her friends. That was when she took them all in. They were all dirty, weary and ragged. They looked like they had been plucked from the middle of a war zone. Even Serena, who Iris knew to be immaculate in her cleanliness, looked like she needed a long shower.

Even more unsettling, Ash had yet to acknowledge her exclamation of his name. Iris' brow furrowed as she regarded him. He kept his attention on the ground, standing close to and slightly behind Misty, his shoulders slumped and his arms crossed as he held Pikachu close to his chest. The Pokémon stared up at him sadly. Iris opened her mouth to bluntly ask him what he was doing, but Misty shook her head, squeezing his hand tightly. Iris didn't understand at first, not until he slowly looked up at her. She almost recoiled at the sight of his eyes.

For a moment, she thought of the look in his eyes when he awoke in a hospital and thought that Victini had died to save him, but this was so much worse than that.

Looking from one person to the next, she asked, "What happened?"

...

Bonnie decided that she hated being indoors. Of course, she understood why they needed to be inside, but she didn't have to like it. Security got tighter and tighter, and she found it nearly impossible to sneak around to eavesdrop anymore. She tried before and was caught. All of the adults, including Brock and Tracey were always busy, and Max was off somewhere trying to train his Pokémon.

That left her and Dedenne lying on the floor in a small pile of boredom.

"Denne?" the Pokémon muttered while glancing over at her.

"I'm bored too," she agreed. Bonnie sighed dramatically as she sat up. "I guess we can go see if Mrs. Paschall and Mrs. Ketchum need some help." To anyone passing by, her lack of enthusiasm was painfully obvious.

She had to do something though, even if that was just walking across the complex to the kitchen, that would at least be something.

Walking out the door of the room, Bonnie stretched her shoulders and held out her hand to Dedenne, who scrambled up, sitting on the top of her head. Pikachu used to do that with Ash. Bonnie wondered if he still did.

Shaking her head, she started walking forward. She didn't want to dwell on her brother or her older friends right now. It wasn't going to help any.

She barely got down the hall when the door flew open and a tall, beautiful woman with dark hair came inside. For a brief moment, Bonnie was itching to get down on one knee and propose to the woman for her brother, but he wasn't even there! She might have been a little bit too old too. A large group of people walked inside, and Bonnie instantly knew that they were siblings. All of them had the same, narrow eyes and it was hard not to notice.

"Hello," the woman said, her voice friendly enough. "It seems we're a little lost. My name's Lucy, and I was supposed to be looking for Brock but I can't seem to find him anywhere."

Bonnie wanted to smack herself in the head. Of course these were Brock's brothers and sisters, it was hard not to see the resemblance. "You guys are Brock's brothers and sisters, right?"

"You know our brother?" the oldest boy asked.

"Yeah! He's down this way!" Excitement rushed through Bonnie as she started to skip down the hall. It might not have been something big, but at least she was able to help in her own way.

...

Delia jumped when she heard the crash. Mimey lurched from his spot at her side, moving in front of her protectively. He focused on the kitchen for a moment before nodding his head. It was safe. Delia patted the Pokémon on the top of the head before carefully entering the room.

"Amanda?" She asked, frowning as she took in the woman before her. Amanda Green was leaning against the counter, a broken glass on the floor and several more glasses on the counter in front of her, some filled with golden liquid, some with clear. She swayed lightly, and it didn't take Delia a lot to guess what it was. "Why?" Leaf's mother had been so good at staying focused since everything went to hell.

Amanda looked up at the woman who was once one of her closest friends. "Yellow! Come have a seat! Celebrate with me!"

Delia grimaced a bit at the old nickname, but still cautiously walked forward, sidestepping the broken glass for now. "Celebrate what?"

"My really massive fuck up!" The woman said cheerfully. "Saw Oak earlier. He looked really down and then I remembered. Got so distracted that I almost missed it."

"Missed what?"

"Ten years," Amanda said with a nod of her head. "It's been exactly ten years since Blue, his wife and sister were all offed."

Delia sat down in the other chair that was there, her eyes going wide. Her mind reeled over the information, and she instinctively wanted to argue that Green was wrong, that it certainly hadn't been that long since John Oak had died. The more she thought about it though, the more she realized it was true. Ash, Gary and Leaf had been seven when Gary's family had passed away, and all of them were now seventeen.

It was hard to believe that time had gone by so quickly. Delia tried to picture John, his wife Hillary and his sister Daisy. She hadn't really known Daisy so her face was like a blurry image. Her throat constricted a bit when she realized, without the pictures that she had left at home, she had a hard time picturing John and Hillary Oak, though she and been quite close to Hillary and had known John for years. Instead, she pictured Gary. Gary, who physically looked so much like his father, yet his colouring, down to his skin tone, hair and eyes, were all that of his mother. Delia tried to picture Blue, remembering that he had the same blue eyes as his father, Samuel. He had been paler, she remembered, his hair much lighter than Gary's. Without using Gary and Samuel as a reference, it was difficult.

Her eyes moved back to Green. "I have a hard time picturing them sometimes."

"Me too, but not for the same reason." Amanda grimaced. "I just picture their bodies. I actually saw it at the scene of the crime."

"It was an accident."

Amanda snorted and raised an eyebrow, her green eyes staring at Delia. "You know that's not what happened and it's just us here. No need to sugarcoat it." She shook her head and downed another shot of amber liquid. "It kills me a bit, you know, that they have that bitch working as an informant." It took Delia a moment to realize that she meant Madame Boss. "Missy Rocket down there played Red like he was a puppet. Nearly twisted him to her side before you saved him." She eyed Delia critically. "You were the youngest of us, but you were the one who changed everything. You stopped him. Got through his thick head before he could do something really stupid. Don't think he ever thanked you."

"He never had to, but he did in his own way."

Green tapped her fingers on the counter. "You think he would have found him. Red and Giovanni I mean. He was a man possessed after Misty died. Giovanni must have got it from dear mumsy. She made everyone think Misty, one of the best water trainers in the region, drowned in her own fucking pool. We tossed her away, and dear sweet Gio sent someone after the rest of us. You were the smart one. Yellow disappeared and no one cared about Delia. The rest of us wore our names proudly and look what that got us. He killed Blue and his family and covered it up like an accident."

Delia already knew about all of this though. She had always known that the accident that took most

of Gary Oak's family away from him wasn't an accident at all. It pained her to think about the fact that Gary was originally supposed to be with them, but he had insisted on staying to play with Ash, so she let him stay overnight. Delia wasn't disillusioned by the fact that Gary had been a young child. Whoever Giovanni sent would have killed him too.

"We never even found out who did it," Delia said sadly.

"Sure I did," Amanda said. Delia looked at her sharply and Amanda waved her off. "Such a handsome man. I was so, so stupid. It was Kene."

"Kene? As in—."

"Leaf's father." Amanda held up one of her drinks. "To bad choices, right? My child's father ruthlessly murdered one of my best friends, his wife and his sister and would have murdered his little son. I let that bastard into our lives and he played me. Their deaths are on me."

Delia reached forward and grabbed one of the drinks, ignoring the burn in her throat. "You left Leaf with me. I had her and Gary with me for days while Samuel grieved and you were gone. I... what did you do to him?"

"Killed him," Green admitted, stating it as if it was a simple fact. "Didn't actually mean to. I wanted to drag him back and hand him over to Red. That would have been fun to see. He came at me, I stabbed him, and then he just wouldn't stop bleeding. He had hemophilia. Shit choice of a job with that. So he bled out before I could do anything, so I just pushed him into the ocean. No one missed him."

"Leaf did," Delia pointed out. "You never told her anything. You could have told her there was an accident. She did like when he visited from time to time. He seemed to actually like her. She asked me once why he left. Why you left." Delia herself had never liked Amanda's boyfriend, and now she realized it was a good judgment call.

"I didn't leave."

"You did. You left when Blue died, and you only came back when you could jump into some kind of mission. You never came back for her."

For the first time that night, Amanda looked ashamed. "Her eyes are his and that...it makes me sick to see them sometimes. I'm glad she looks like me for the most part. To know that the man that gave them to her was a monster."

"That wasn't fair. She never did anything wrong."

"Is that how you do it? Look at Ash all the time and not get angry. He looks a lot like his father. Your eyes, not nearly as pasty, but a lot like him otherwise. It's really weird seeing him with Misty's niece...Misty junior. Must be really strange for you." Amanda suddenly looked at her intently.

"No." Delia shook her head, her tone stern and eyes blazing. "It doesn't matter who he looks like. He's my son and that's what matters. He's not me. He's not his father. Ash is Ash. As for Misty, it was shocking to see at first, but she's not her aunt either. They look so much alike I sometimes expect her to react like her aunt would have, but she doesn't. She's not her. Ash isn't his father. Leaf isn't her father. What we did probably influenced this somehow." Delia motioned around them. "But they don't have our sins just because we're family."

Amanda slid a one-shot glass between her eyes, green eyes looking into Delia's brown ones. "Does

he know?"

"I'm sorry?"

The words that escaped her lips were doused with blatant sarcasm. "Does Ash know that his father, Jack Ketchum, is more famously known as Pokémon Master Red?"

Delia was silent before she took another drink. That was enough of an answer for Green, but she still said, "No."

...

They took turns washing off the dirt and grime that covered their skin. It wasn't the same as having a shower, but it was the best that they could do for now. Clothes that were dotted with blood and dirt were changed for fresher ones, and that really helped everyone in their own way.

Misty dug through her bag, finding a granola bar. She looked back towards Ash, who was staring out over the lake, mindlessly petting Pikachu's soft fur. Pikachu's ears twitched as she made her way towards them, and he looked at her curiously. Ash just kept staring forward, like he was caught in some sort of daydream.

"Hey." Misty touched his arm, and Ash slowly broke his gaze from the lake, looking over at her. "Here, eat it."

Ash looked down at the granola bar that had been pushed into his hands. "I'm not hungry."

"You didn't eat yesterday," Misty said. "You have to have something. For me?"

Ash opened his mouth to protest, but stopped as he looked into her pleading eyes. He sighed and opened the package, taking a bite out of it. Normally, Ash would scarf a tiny snack like that in two bites, but it looked like a struggle for him to even get that one bite down. He genuinely looked like he was going to be sick, but kept going until it was gone.

"Thank you," Misty muttered, taking the wrapper from him. Ash nodded, eyes looking down towards the ground again.

Iris watched the entire exchange with sad eyes and shook her head. She looked towards Dawn. "On the one hand, I wish I could have helped you guys, but on the other..." She shrugged.

Dawn understood. No one their age should have been near a situation like they were, experienced trainer or not. Instead of voicing this, she asked, "Do you know where we are?"

"Close to the Pinwheel Forest," Iris said. "We don't really want to stay close to the city."

"We?"

"Me, Cilan and some others. We were getting out of Striation City and saved a couple other people, so we stuck together." Iris frowned. "Things have been a mess around here too."

"You don't really know the people you're staying with?" Gary asked, raising an eyebrow. "That sounds dangerous to me." He didn't care if people started calling him paranoid. Trainers gathering together in cottages wasn't unheard of during travels – people stayed where they could – but after everything, not knowing who was there was just too risky.

"I've been around them for a while now. They're a bit of a drag, but they're not Plasma." Iris made a

face. "Whatever that even means anymore. But yeah, we can head back towards our little safe house. At least get Cilan before we go trekking across Unova."

"We?" Dawn asked with a tilt of her head.

"Cilan and I know Unova better than you guys. Of course we're going to come." Iris rolled her eyes and turned around to face the forest. "You guys coming, or what?"

Everyone else exchanged uncomfortable looks, no one really wanting to leave the relative safety of their current spot for an unknown place with unknown people. Dawn was the one that chose for them. Choosing to trust Iris' judgment, the blue-haired girl started walking after her friend. Everyone else followed suit.

Ash trailed at the back of the group, glancing back over his shoulder. Pikachu looked at his trainer curiously, muttering a soft, "Pikapi?"

"It's nothing." Ash moved to catch up to Misty, who was waiting for him at the edge of the forest. He let her take his hand to move him along at a better pace, glancing back over his shoulder in the opposite direction. The direction they should have been going in. There wasn't a single part of Ash that wanted to go there now though.

He wanted to get as far away from the orb that was there as he could.

...

The sky was already dark by the time they reached the road. Iris assured them that it was a fairly quick walk to their little safe house when they traveled along the road, the only problem being the influx of cars that were going up and down them.

Iris ducked back down into the trees as another one zoomed by them. She huffed angrily and slunk back into the forest where the others were waiting. "It's no good. A Team Plasma car goes by every couple minutes. They'll find us too easily and I don't want to lead them back to where the others are."

"Is this normal?" Gary asked, crossing his arms in front of him.

"I think so. There are curfews in the cities so they probably want to catch people walking between them at night too?" Iris shrugged her shoulders but then brightened up. "I guess we're camping out in the woods! Come on, let's get away from the road!"

"What's the deal with Team Plasma anyway?" Misty asked, eyes flicking towards the road. "Like, what are they doing here?"

"I don't even think they know," Iris admitted, shaking her head. She ducked under a low-hanging branch as she led the way through the dark forest. "I guess it started when Team Plasma showed up with a fake Kyurem."

"How did you know it was fake?" Clemont asked her curiously.

"It's easy to tell if you know what you're looking for." She shrugged her shoulders. "No one else really believes me though but I saw it myself when I was up in Opelucid City. I'd started training with Drayden lately, but I was coming down to Striation City to meet up with Cilan." She touched the Pokéball that had Hydreigon locked safely away. That was where she found him. "Anyway, Drayden knew I was going to go to Striation anyway so when that mess started, he ordered me to go down to try and see if I could get any help. I really think a part of him just wanted to keep me

safe." Iris shook her head sadly. "Everything up North is a frozen wasteland now and the league is basically useless because they have no idea who to fight."

"Team Plasma," Serena said as if it was obvious.

"That's the kicker. There are two factions of Team Plasma running around. One looks like old-timey knights and you know, if they didn't corner you and force you to give up your Pokémon they wouldn't be that bad." She spun around and started walking backwards, looking directly at Ash. "N is their leader."

Ash stared at her, his shoulders slumping a bit. He sighed and looked down at the ground, but that was the only acknowledgment that she got that he even heard her at all.

"What about the other ones?" Misty asked her, breaking the awkward silence.

"The other ones are the nasty ones. They're dressed like pirates or something, I don't know. They claim they're all about Pokémon rights too but I think it's like everywhere else." Iris shook her head again as she turned to face the right direction. "I think they just want to take over."

"Of course they do," Gary toned in. He nudged Leaf lightly. "Have to be like everyone else, right?"

"Hmm," she muttered, crossing her arms in front of her.

"Hey, Iris?" Dawn spoke up. "Which faction of Team Plasma has Kyurem?"

"Not N's group." She smiled almost bitterly. "It's sad, but I almost wished that he did." Iris perked up a bit. "You guys knew that it was a fake though. So do you know what it is?"

"Yeah, and that's a very long story."

"I've got time." Iris motioned to the forest around them. They weren't leaving anytime soon.

...

He was so, so tired as he laid out on the smooth stones, surrounded by massive, black pillars. The only specks of light came from the sinister glow surrounding the pillars and the faint glow of the little Pokémon he was holding. There wasn't much room to move, and it was like being trapped in a tomb. Though he held Pikachu and Victini close to him, it did nothing to ward off the chilling cold that had actually stopped being cold a while ago. In fact, he felt almost like he was burning.

His chest felt tight, and he gasped for the air that just wouldn't fill his lungs. Moments before, he had been stumbling, trying to get Victini and Pikachu out of their tomb, only to fall to the ground, his muscles not cooperating anymore. His breathing, once rapid and desperate, was slow and shallow as the rise and fall of his chest became the only movements from his body. His shivering from the bitter cold had stopped long ago.

Mostly though, Ash felt physically numb and so very tired. It was hard to keep his eyes open, and even then his vision faded in and out, permanent black spots were already forming no matter how many times he blinked. It wasn't a physical feeling, but an emotional one that he rarely felt. It was fear.

Ash was terrified for Pikachu and Victini. He was doing his best to shield them from the cold, but it wasn't going to do much good once the air became too thin for them. As his movements started to slow until he couldn't move anymore, Ash realized exactly what was happening. He was going to die there, trying to save poor, innocent Victini, but eventually the legendary Pokémon and

Pikachu would succumb to the same fate. He wasn't strong enough to break the barriers surrounding them to get out, and his Pokéballs were frozen shut so he couldn't get help. He had failed.

As it grew harder and harder to breath, Ash realized that he was never going to see his mother again. He was never going to see his friends or any of his Pokémon. He wondered what would happen to them. He hoped his friends took good care of them. All his water Pokémon loved Misty.

Misty. He would never see her again either. He had never told her exactly how he felt about her, because he hadn't really realized exactly what it was before. She would be okay though. Misty was strong.

Tears welled up in his eyes, freezing before they even slid off of his cheeks. "I'm sorry," he slurred out, not quite sure if he was actually saying what he meant to say. "I'm so sorry."

"Why couldn't you save us?"

Ash's eyes flew open and he wasn't staring at Victini anymore. Horror rushed through him as he found himself face to face with Ritchie, bloody, broken and bruised. "Why?"

"Pikapi!"

"Tini tini!"

Ash closed his eyes, a single tear managing to fall, freezing and shattering on the stone as he took his last breath.

...

Misty jumped as Pikachu landed on her. Ash woke up, lurching forward and accidentally tossing the little Pokémon onto her as he choked and coughed loudly. She scrambled to her knees, Pikachu at her side immediately, as everyone else woke up. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Ash didn't answer her. He had his eyes closed as he breathed in and out quickly, holding his hand to his chest as he shook. Just by touching him, Misty could feel how fast his heart was racing, and she could see beads of sweat falling from his hairline. "Ash? Are you okay?"

Gary appeared beside her, pushing her back a little bit. "Ash? It's Gary. Look at me for a second." Misty watched, confused as Ash slowly opened his eyes and looked at Gary. "Good job. Now, you need to focus on your breathing. Slow, steady breaths just like me. In and out. You can do it."

"Gary, what—"

"Panic attack," Gary explained, though he didn't say how he knew. "You want to help him, you need to stay calm too. No freaking out like you were a minute ago." That was easier said than done. Everyone else was wide awake and looking equally startled at what was happening. Gary was the only one who had been quick enough to realize what was happening and act appropriately. "Ash, I want you to reach out and take Misty's hand. Just hold it." He looked back at her. "Stay where you are and let him reach out to you. Something simple that gets his muscles tired will help him focus."

Misty nodded her head and put her hand where Gary indicated, letting Ash reach out to her to hold her hand. When he finally did, she grasped it tightly, running her thumb over the top of his hand. Pikachu inched forward, carefully placing his tiny paw on top.

Gary nodded his head as he watched them, slowly rising to his feet to back up and give them some

space. "Stay calm, okay?"

Misty nodded and looked back at Ash. "I'm here, and so is Pikachu. We're all here."

It took a few moments for him to look up, but when he did, Ash glanced around at the dark forest. "Where are we?"

"Unova, remember? Giratina brought us here and we met up with Iris?"

Ash's shoulders slumped. "Unova."

"What happened?" May whispered to Gary, one of the first things she had said in quite a while. He just shrugged.

Ash's arm began to shake from the strain of holding it out awkwardly, so Misty let it go. Pikachu carefully shifted closer, and Ash's eyes darted to the Pokémon. He stared at Pikachu for a moment before grabbing him and hugging him close. Pikachu squeaked with surprise, but nuzzled his face into Ash's shirt.

"You were going to die," Ash mumbled to Pikachu. "I tried to save you and Victini but I screwed up. I'm sorry."

"Victini?" Misty repeated. "When did you try to save Pikachu and Victini?"

Iris gasped, drawing attention to her. "I know what he's talking about. It was a couple years ago now involving legendary Pokémon. Ash was trying to save Victini, who was trapped in this forcefield. Anyway, this dragon force energy forced the castle into the sky but Victini was trapped. Ash stayed with him and he..." Iris faltered a bit. "He was in the hospital for a little while after that. He froze and we were told it would have been incredibly hard to breathe up there."

Misty looked back at Ash and wrapped her arms around him. "It was a nightmare. You're okay now. You're here, Pikachu's here and Victini's okay. We just saw him, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah I remember," Ash mumbled, leaning forward so that his forehead was resting on her shoulder, his eyes fluttering.

They all waited in silence for something else to happen, but when nothing did, Misty waved to everyone else. "We'll be okay. Get some sleep, we all need it." Her words were met with reluctant nods.

Misty maneuvered herself and Ash so that they were laying on the ground, curled up close together. She felt Ash shift, letting Pikachu crawl out from between them so that he was by their heads and not crushed.

"Mist?" Ash mumbled.

"Yeah?"

"Ritchie was there too." He paused, looking away from her. "It was my fault."

"No, it wasn't."

"It was. I couldn't heal him." He closed his eyes. "I wish I had died instead of him."

Misty's breath hitched at his words, loud enough so Pikachu could hear too but quiet enough so that no one else could, even though they were all still undoubtedly awake.

Misty hugged Ash close to her, tears welling up in her eyes. He wasn't okay at all, and she wasn't sure that she'd be able to hold him together.

...

May watched Clemont roll up his sleeping bag and shove it into his pack. A small voice inside of her head said that she should be up helping the others pack up, but the rest of her body just didn't respond to that thought. Instead, she looked down at Ash, who was sleeping with his head on her lap. He hadn't woken up yet, but he got really restless unless he was close to someone, so she opted to sit with him. It made her feel like she was helping a little bit.

Pikachu sat beside them, not willing to stray far from his trainer for anything. His ears twitched with every little sound, and his eyes darted to every new little movement that someone made, clearly staying on guard. He glanced up at May as she ran her fingers through his fur.

"Should he be sleeping this long?" Serena asked Gary, eyes flitting over to them.

"Hard to say how much sleep he actually got last night," he answered, shrugging his shoulders. "Let him sleep. He's not going to be much good awake." Gary didn't say it, but May could see the way he looked at her. She wasn't much good to them either. At least Leaf, though uncharacteristically quiet, was helping. May just couldn't find it in her to do anything.

"Stop," Iris said suddenly, and everyone immediately ceased their movement to stare at her. Her brow furrowed as she looked around, perking up a bit when she heard it again.

"Iris!"

"Cilan?!" she yelled.

Serena panicked, suddenly clapping her hand over Iris' mouth. "What if it's not him?"

Iris slipped out from under her hand, frowning. "I'm sure it's him. Why would anyone else be in the forest, yelling my name in his voice? No one knows you're here and no one cares about me here."

"Iris?"

"Over here!"

There was some rustling in the bushes and a moment later, a tall young man with bright green hair stumbled out of the woods. Relief flashed across his face when he saw his friend, but that swiftly changed to confusion as he looked around at everyone else in the clearing. "Huh?"

"It's a long story," Iris muttered to him as she walked over. Forcing a smile onto her face, she turned around and motioned to everyone. "So you know Ash, Misty, Dawn, Serena and Clemont. The brunettes of the group are Gary Oak, Leaf Green and May Maple. Everyone who doesn't know him, this is Cilan!"

Gary stared at Cilan skeptically, looking behind him. "You weren't followed, were you?"

Cilan was visibly taken back by the question. "Of course not. I haven't seen anyone else all morning since I came looking." His expression softened a bit. "I was worried when you didn't come back."

"Yeah, we got caught up last night and Team Plasma was on patrol so we just stayed put. Like we said we would. Remember?" Iris rolled her eyes, she knew that Cilan meant well but he tended to

hover a little bit more than normal lately. It was understandable, but a bit annoying.

"Right, sorry." He laughed a bit and jumped as Ash suddenly awoke with a startled cry.

May put her hands on Ash's shoulders as he quickly calmed himself down. He looked up at her, the tiniest of smiles appearing on his face before it fell. She nodded her head slightly and let her hands fall back down.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu crawled up onto his lap, and Ash held the Pokémon close to him as he blinked his eyes.

His brow furrowed and he turned around, looking up at Cilan with confusion. "Huh?"

Cilan regarded his friend, concern spreading across his face. "Ash, are you okay?" He was more than a bit surprised when the normally vibrant boy turned his eyes to the ground, the very picture of defeat.

He looked up at Iris who just shook her head. "Well, you guys look like you could use a good meal. You can come back to where we're staying to get something."

"When was the last time we actually had a meal?" Misty asked Leaf, who just shrugged in response.

Cilan watched Misty walk over to Ash and help him off of the ground. She whispered something to him and he just shook his head. He turned his attention to Iris and whispered, "What happened? All of them look terrible."

"It's bad, Cilan, and I only know the bare basics." Iris' brown eyes flickered up to her him. "They need our help. Somehow they're working towards stopping Team Rocket, which may help stop the others. It may stop Team Plasma."

He bristled at the mention of their regional crime syndicate, his hands curling into fists as Iris looked down at the ground. Cilan gritted his teeth but forced his sour look back behind a façade of calmness as he addressed everyone, "Look, whatever's going on, you can count on us to help you. We're friends, right?"

"That might not be a good enough reason," Clemont said slowly. "I—we could use more help but..." He looked over to where May was tracing shapes in the grass, to Leaf who was staring up at the sky with the same contemplative look that had overtaken her since she awoke, and then over to Ash who had gone tense again while staring at the ground.

"Maybe that's why we need more new eyes aside from me around here," Dawn suggested. She had gone to the prison too, she had seen horrors there, but some sort of blessing made it all muddled in her mind.

"She might be right," Serena agreed, though her expression portrayed how unsure she really was. None of them wanted to drag anyone else into this mess if they didn't have to.

Iris looked towards Ash to see if he was going to give his two cents, but he wasn't paying attention to her. Instead, he was staring at the woods, blinking rapidly as if he was trying to get something out of his eyes. She watched as his face warped into a look of moderate alarm and he took a step backwards, opening his mouth to speak.

Whatever he was going to say didn't matter as a vehicle suddenly burst through the trees. Men and women with distinctively designed uniforms followed, holding weapons in their hands.

Gary was about to grab a Pokéball but Leaf suddenly grabbed his hand. He looked at her, a snide remark on the tip of his tongue, but it died at her alarmed tone. "Don't. They'll kill them."

He thought back to her poor Beartic that had to be left with Nurse Joy and would be put back into the electronic system if she made it through.

One minute, everyone was rearing to fight, but the next, they were all wary to release their Pokémon and Ash hugged Pikachu tightly to him.

"What seems to be the problem, sir?" Cilan asked cheerfully. "We were just camping."

"Owning Pokémon is illegal," one of the men said. "You're all under arrest. If you resist, we will be forced to take drastic measures." He looked over his shoulder. "Are these all the people you followed last night?"

"He's new," one of the woman said, nodding to Cilan. "He just showed up. These are the ones I saw by the road last night."

Gary desperately tried to catch Ash's eye but the other boy wasn't having it. He kept all of his attention on Pikachu, who was clearly ready to fight to protect his trainer. Gary tried to make what he wanted clear in his thoughts before remembering that didn't matter, Ash couldn't read thoughts. Still, he should have been able to do something to help them escape Team Plasma.

Then it hit Gary. If that woman had been watching them all night, why hadn't Ash said anything?

...

Stripped of their Pokéballs and bound in handcuffs, they were all forced into the back of an armoured vehicle that was normally used for moving prisoners. At some point they had gotten off the rough back roads they had been driving on, onto smoother ones. They felt themselves going up an incline, and then getting a slight bump every once in a while, but it was still a fairly smooth drive.

"We must be on a bridge," Cilan said when they first noticed the shift. "Probably the Skyarrow Bridge, based on the time we've been driving."

"Where do you think they're taking us?" Dawn asked him.

"Who knows? I haven't been near central Unova since this all started." She reeled back a bit at how annoyed Cilan sounded. He sighed and closed his eyes before staring back at her. "Sorry. I'm just frustrated."

"You're not the only one," Misty noted, and even just her voice made it sound like she was ready for a fight. All the attention turned to her, but she kept her eyes focused directly on Gary, who met her harsh gaze with his own. "Just spit it out."

At first, Gary was silent, but then he snapped, "That's rich coming from you. You're glaring at me."

"And you're the one that looks like you want to punch Ash!"

"Well maybe he should have mentioned the fact that there was someone following us!" Gary turned his attention to the boy in question, who was leaning against Misty's side with his eyes closed until the growling started. His dull brown eyes looked at Gary. "We could have beat her! You heard what she said when they were loading us in here: she didn't attack because she waited for backup because there were too many of us! Why? Why didn't you notice her?"

"I—I don't know." Ash brought his knees up to his chest.

"You don't know?" Gary asked in disbelief. "You don't know?"

"Leave him alone!" Misty hissed at him.

"You can't coddle him!"

"You're the one that helped him through his panic attack last night and you're asking why he missed a single person?" Gary visibly deflated at Misty's words. He knew that she was right in that case, that it was almost cruel of him to expect so much from the other boy when he wasn't feeling well.

Gary knew this but the stress of trying to figure out how to get them out of this mess was getting to him already. A part of him still wished that he had fought back there, they had strong Pokémon and they would have won in the long run, but there was no way all of them would have come out unscathed.

His eyes look towards Ash, who turned to Dawn and said something quietly. They all helped in their own ways, but it had been largely Ash that kept them moving forward this whole time, and yet here he was complaining after a couple days on the job. He originally thought that they could lead as a team until Ash was better, but Gary was quickly realizing that might not be an option. May and Leaf were mentally out of the game, though thankfully not with as much severity as Ash (at least, that's what it looked like). Clemont didn't seem quite right either, now that he thought about it, staying fairly quiet even while he worked. Misty, the person Gary originally counted on, didn't even try to hide the fact that Ash was her clear priority. Dawn and Serena both certainly tried to help as much as they could, he'd give them that.

Maybe having Iris and Cilan around would be good. He didn't know them personally, but Ash tended to make friends with pretty amazing people. They were definitely trustworthy, and it might have been a good idea to add a fresh perspective, one that wasn't as bent and broken as they were.

While Gary was lost in his thoughts, Ash turned to Dawn and asked, "I had a panic attack?"

"You don't remember?" she asked him, tilting her head slightly. "It was terrifying. I thought you were having a heart attack. Gary and then Misty and Pikachu calmed you down."

"Oh." His shoulders slumped slightly at the mention of his Pokémon.

Realizing that talking about Pikachu probably wasn't the best idea, Dawn turned her attention to everyone else. "I...this is going to sound bad but...we did the right thing, right? Would they have killed our Pokémon if we let them out?"

Iris hesitated, but Cilan's hand clenched into a fist. "Yes. They'd rather kill them than let trainers have them. They'll kill anyone that gets in their way."

His uncharacteristically harsh tone wasn't lost on anyone. Realizing his slip-up, Cilan looked down at his bound hands and took a deep breath. Iris just looked at him sadly from the opposite side of the truck.

"We need to get out of here somehow," Serena spoke up. "Before we get to wherever they're taking us."

"There would be less of them around now, right?" May asked, her voice light and timid.

Serena smiled broadly at her. "Exactly! There'll probably be a lot when we stop."

"Well, we're off the bridge," Cilan said. "It's not bumping anymore."

"Alright, so we're on solid ground. That works. We just need a plan to break out of these handcuffs, bust through a bulletproof truck while it's speeding, get up front to get our Pokémon, fight off the Team Plasma grunts and run as fast as we can. Any takers?"

"Way to be optimistic," Leaf mumbled under her breath.

Misty looked at them thoughtfully before shifting closer to Ash so that she could take his hands in her own despite the handcuffs. "Ash?" He looked up at her. "You need to do something for me, but you're not going to like it. You need to get us out of here."

Unaltered fear washed across his face as he realized what she was talking about. "I can't. Misty, I —."

"I know." It surprised Misty a bit that Gary was so quick to condemn Ash for not using his Aura abilities when it was pretty obvious what the problem was. She could already see that he was terrified to use it again after almost attacking Paul with it. Still, they needed to fight through the fear now. "You said you wanted to keep me safe, right? This is how you have to do it." It might have been a bit manipulative, but Ash needed to get some sort of motivation to get up. He was their only chance of getting out before Team Plasma drove them to who knows where.

Ash stared at her and then looked down at their intertwined hands. He was shaking a bit, so Misty leaned forward and rested her head on his shoulder, squeezing his fingers gently. He took a deep breath and she watched as a faint glow started to surround one of his hands. He twisted his palm around, pressing it to the cuffs. It took a moment, but they broke and fell to the ground with a loud clang, drawing attention to them.

"How did you do that?" the boy that ratted them out asked.

Ash ignored him, looking back at Misty who nodded encouragingly. Her smile vanished when Ash shifted close to her, thinking that he was just going to curl up into a ball again. Instead, he put his hands over her cuffs and concentrated, breaking them like he did his. Misty rubbed her wrists and glanced around to see if there was anything else that she could use to break the others out of their shackles as Ash stepped over their legs to go to the back of the truck.

They were moving too fast; he couldn't shift the Aura from the ground up to stop the car. All he could do was use his own Aura.

Opening his eyes, he took a step back, casting one last glance to Misty, before he focused on his hands. He closed his eyes and focused on generating that glowing energy that he had been avoiding. He always thought that Aura Spheres were his most dangerous ability, but he had been wrong.

"What is that?" Cilan asked in shock.

"And since when can he do it?" Iris added, clearly just as flabbergasted.

"That is a very long story," Gary answered. "We'll talk about it later."

Ash opened his eyes again and stared at the Aura Sphere. He took another step back until he was right beside May, who stared up at him with wide eyes.

He thrust his hand forward, the sphere slamming into the metal door with enough force to rip it right off of the hinges. It flew back behind them, nearly hitting another car with the Team Plasma insignia on it. The car swerved and then they all jerked as the truck swerved as well, coming to a stop. People piled out of the car and rushed forward, but Ash kept his hand out and they slammed into a barrier that they couldn't see.

"I need something to open the cuffs with," Misty muttered as she looked at everyone else.

"My pins!" Iris shook her head back and forth. "I have a ton holding up my hair. Take one."

Misty hurried over to her side, taking the pin from her hair as she started to work on her cuffs.

Ash ignored them, closing his eyes and focusing on the cabin of the truck. He concentrated on the bag that had their Pokéball stored in it. It wasn't easy since it was up in the cabin of the truck but he managed to do it, focusing on one Pokéball specifically. They were all locked, but he could feel the energy trying to escape, trying to manipulate it. He kept the barriers up so no one could get to them, feeling and waiting, ignoring everyone else's words.

He felt the energy around the Pokéball shift, and a very small smile appeared on his face as he opened his eyes.

Ria exploded out of her Pokéball, kicking one of the men out of the front of the truck. She flipped up onto the roof and ran down unleashing a wave of unfocused energy to toss the grunts back. She landed in front of Ash and nodded her head. "I've got these idiots. You get them."

"Did Ria just talk?" Iris asked as she stood up. She looked over at Misty. "What the hell?"

"Let's just get everyone out of here," Misty insisted. Iris decided to let it go for now, taking another pin out of her hair to help with the handcuffs.

One by one, everyone was freed. Misty moved to the edge of the truck and looked out. "We need to get our other Pokémon. Can you try to keep a shield around us?"

Ash slowly nodded his head. "I can try."

"Good enough." They jumped out of the back of the truck one by one and started to move along the edge where none of the people or the bullets could reach them.

Then the truck came to life. Before anyone could do anything, the driver slammed on the gas pedal and started to speed away.

Ash jerked around, completely losing focus on what he was doing and using his Aura to stop the truck from escaping with their Pokémon. He didn't realize that his shift in focus left them all exposed.

Team Plasma quickly took advantage of the slip though.

Leaf froze when one of the men rounded on her, pointing the muzzle of his gun at her. Her eyes went wide and she just stared at it, unable to move.

The next thing she knew, she hit the ground, another weight on top of her. She looked up at Serena, who had tackled her down to the ground just before the man pulled the trigger. Clemont ran to help them while Gary tackled the man to the ground, wrestling the gun from his hands. Likewise, Misty and Iris both confronted people before they could start shooting. Ria quickly shifted from offense to defense to protect them.

"I need your help," Dawn said to May suddenly. "You too Cilan, come on!" She grabbed both of their hands and urged them over to where the truck had stopped. "The doors are probably locked so boost me through the window!" May and Cilan exchanged unsure looks, and she growled. "I'm the smallest. I can get in there and get the Pokémon! We don't have time to argue!" Reluctantly, they both reached down to create a basket with their hands, which she stepped in. They boosted her up the rest of the way to the window and she grabbed the ledge, easily rolling inside.

"What the—?" That was something she had completely forgot about. The driver stared at her with mild alarm before bringing his gun up. Dawn recoiled as he squeezed the trigger, unable to do anything else. They both stared at it oddly when it didn't do anything. Dawn glanced out the window and saw Ash staring at the gun with a concentrated look and realized he must have been doing something to him. She dove for the bag with the Pokéballs, and the driver tried to stop her but he just hit a barrier. Dawn smiled and waved at him as she unlocked the door and slipped out with her prize.

"We need to sort out whose is whose," Cilan muttered to himself.

"To hell with that," Dawn grumbled and grabbed a handful. "Pokéball go!" Getting in line with her thinking, May and Cilan started tossing as many Pokéballs as they possibly could, releasing all of them.

Iris looked around as they started doing that, her heart skipping a bit as terror rushed through her. "Don't!" She got off of the person she had tackled to the ground and ran at them, but it was too late.

Hydreigon roared loudly, looking at the people and Pokémon around him. His eyes landed on the Team Plasma insignia and lunged forward, not with an attack, but with his teeth.

"No!" Iris shrieked but it was too late as Hydreigon's teeth from the middle head latched onto the arm of one of the grunts, the other two snapping at others around them.

She ran as fast as she could, grabbing the Pokéball off of the ground and then running at the Pokémon. She couldn't watch as Hydreigon threw the person to the ground and they shook in pain. She hit the button on her Pokéball and the light surrounded the Pokémon, pulling it back inside just in time. She quickly switched it so it would lock again and fell to her knees, her entire body shaking.

If the idea of a boy with some kind of strange power wasn't enough to make Team Plasma wary, the sight of their badly injured companion was. They moved quickly, gathering him up before retreating into the car and speeding away.

Silence surrounded them, even with all of the Pokémon out.

"What the hell was that?" Gary asked, breaking the silence.

"Team Plasma...they...it's not his fault. I'm trying to help him," Iris choked out, tears gathering in her eyes. "It's not his fault."

"I'm sorry," Dawn choked out as she knelt beside Iris. "I didn't know. I'm so sorry."

"We need to move," Misty said, drawing attention to herself. "They will come back and we can't be here when they do."

"She's right," Clemont agreed, staring at the Pokéball in Iris' hand.

Gary looked at Cilan. "Where do we go? I don't even know where we are?"

Cilan looked around them and took a deep breath. "These are the outskirts of Castelia City." He closed his eyes for a moment and snapped his fingers. "I know where we can go."

"Get your Pokémon then, let's get moving."

"Pikapi?" Pikachu cooed as he jumped up into Ash's arms.

"I'm okay." He glanced at Ria. "You did really well." She smiled and nodded her head. He looked around at his other Pokémon and took a deep breath. "I'll—I'll let you all out later, okay?" It was reluctant, but they all nodded and disappeared back into their Pokéballs.

"You did good too." Ash looked up at Misty. She kissed his cheek quickly. "Come on, we need to run."

He looked around at everyone else and mumbled something under his breath, but he still took Misty's hand and let her lead him away.

Just for now, Misty decided to ignore what she heard, but she wouldn't be able to get the words 'I wish we could' out of her mind for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

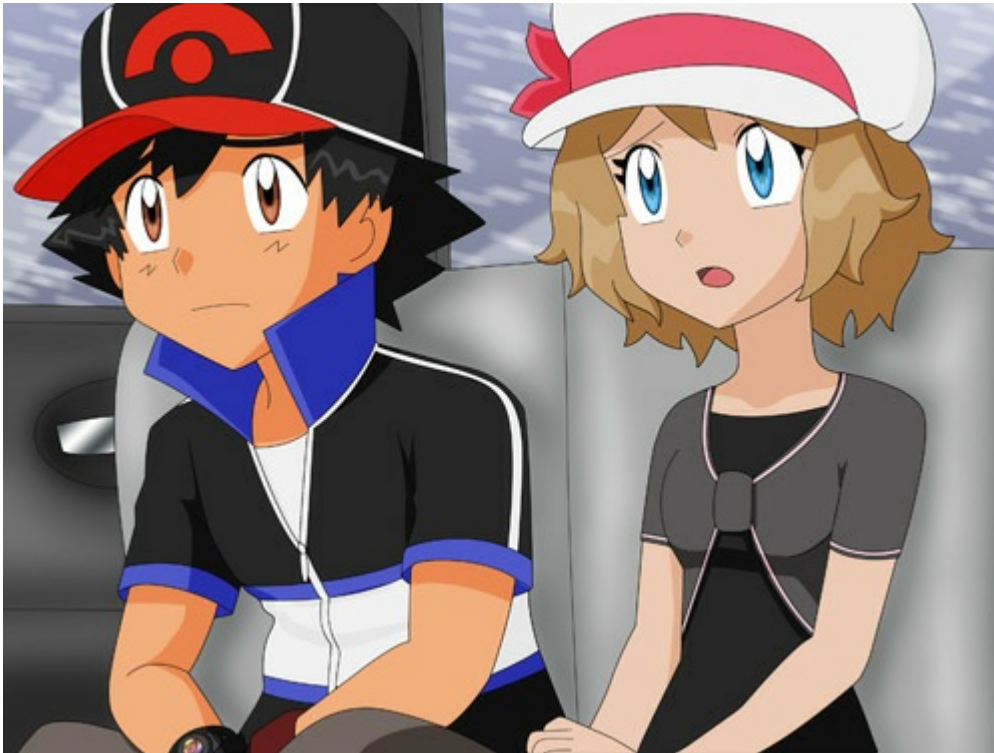
Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Undercover Capers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



May wrinkled her nose as she pulled her legs closer to her chest, her eyes narrowing. "It really smells in here."

"That's what you want to talk about?" Iris asked, eyes wide with indignation. "Not the exact details that Arceus himself wants us guys to get little glass orbs so that he can somehow use them to save the world because we won't be able to do it ourselves? No? Just the stink down here?"

Then May blinked at her. "I'm used to it."

"Or the fact that Ash apparently has magic powers that he kept from us?" Cilan added, sounding slightly hurt about that fact.

"I was there when he got them. It's not...it's not always easy for him to control." May twisted her hair in her fingers and glanced down at Dawn, who was napping beside her. "The only reason he wouldn't have said anything is to keep you safe. He's a good person like that." She frowned and looked down. "Better than me."

As they spoke, Gary found himself pacing back and forth nervously. The entrance to the sewers was fairly close to where they escaped Team Plasma, so there was a very high chance that they'd track them there. He wanted to get moving, but unfortunately no one knew exactly where to go.

"If you keep pacing I'm going to shove you down into one of the other tunnels," Leaf snapped at him.

Gary snorted. "That would mean actually doing something."

She bristled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, I don't know." He stopped pacing and crossed his arms as he stared down at her. "You did only freeze when there was a gun pointed at you."

"That wasn't my fault, it's not like I meant to!" Leaf smacked her hand on the ground. "People can't always help what they do or how they act! Just because it says something in a book or something seems like the more logical option doesn't mean it's what'll happen! Why are you being a total dick?"

Gary took a deep breath to try and calm himself. "We're being hunted by another Team and we're not even in a good hiding spot. We have no idea where the orbs are and the one person that has the ability to feel them out is too sick to help us right now. Then there's the fact that I almost watched my girlfriend get shot! If that's even what this is anymore!"

"And what does that mean?"

"The last I checked people were supposed to communicate to make things work. Hell, Ash is the most clueless idiot in the world when it comes to girls and he's had a girlfriend for three years now because of it. You..." Gary grunted angrily and ran his hand through his hair. "You keep everything hidden away. It's like I don't even know you! I remember the friend I had when I was younger. The reclusive girl that left home the same day I did. The girl I met in Sinnoh who was trying to figure things out by doing research on anything she could from poisons to water migrations. I sort of knew the person who realized she wanted to compete in the league tournaments and started training for them again after talking to Ash about it. I thought I knew the girl who told me back on that ship that she liked me. But really, I have no clue what's going on in your head anymore. You want to be a leader but then you step back and then step forward again and then just crumble. Relationships don't work this way."

Leaf glared at him, trying desperately to hide the warm tears that welled up in her eyes. She wasn't going to let Gary Oak's words hurt her again. She turned away from him. "Maybe I'm just not built for one then."

Gary opened his mouth to say something else, but turned around to storm away instead. He approached Clemont, who was typing on his computer. "Did you get in?"

"I'm working on it," Clemont answered him, keeping his eyes down, hidden by the glare on his glasses. "It's a lot of information to get through on a portable computer. I'm going as fast as I can." His hands clenched into fists and his shoulders slumped down a bit.

Gary's first instinct was to snap at him to work faster but he knew that Clemont didn't deserve to receive the brunt of his bad mood. He watched his friend with cautious eyes and took a step back before turning.

Gary walked a few feet down the tunnel that they were in, where they were taking turns keeping watch in case someone came. He knelt down next to Serena and said, "Hey."

"Hey, it's not your turn yet."

"I know, but I was wondering if you could go talk to Clemont?" She raised an eyebrow at him. "He looks really stressed...even more than normal all things considered. After what happened to everyone...well...everyone's handling things in their own way and he hasn't mentioned anything but he just seems stressed, like I said. I'll take your shift here."

"Alright." She pushed herself up and smiled slightly at him, walking back the way he came.

Finding Clemont was easy enough. He glanced up at her briefly when she sat down next to him, but turned his attention back to the computer. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, I'm fine. Just trying to hack into a protected system to get access to the street cams so we can figure out what's going on before we get trapped here by Team Plasma. No big deal"

"Sarcasm much?" Serena nudged him gently, her expression softening. "This is about Newmoon Island, isn't it?"

His fingers hesitated, hovering over the keys, before he kept going. "Maybe."

"If you didn't get the power off when you did a lot of other people would have died, you know that, right? Maybe all of us if they would have been able to call for backup."

"But I let all of those people in that prison block die!" Clemont stopped typing and stared up at her wildly. "I couldn't get through the stupid encryption and I knew what was going to happen and then I didn't even help Leaf! I just sat there and that crazy woman almost killed her!" He put his hands in his hair and shook his head. "What type of person does that make me?"

"It's not your fault," she stressed again. "I know we all feel horrible about what happened and it won't go away anytime soon, but you did the best you could and maybe it didn't work out then but we need you and it will work out sometimes. It doesn't make it better, but it's still not your fault. It's Team Galactic – Team Rocket's fault."

Clemont stared at Serena for a moment before a small smile appeared on his face. "You're stronger than you think you are, you know that, right?"

Serena shook her head, amusement flitting across her features. She looked at him thoughtfully before leaning over and resting her head on his shoulder. Clemont's face went red, but she didn't move or say anything, she just closed her eyes. He looked back down at his computer and kept working, careful not to jostle her too much.

...

Dawn jerked awake, startling everyone around her. She looked around wildly, not recognizing where she was until her eyes landed on May, who was still sitting beside her. The tension rushed from her body instantly. "Sorry. Nightmare."

"I get them too," May said with a nod of her head. She regarded Dawn curiously. "Do you wanna talk about it?"

Dawn thought for a moment, her mind flickering over the images that she had been forced to see, her brow furrowing. "I can't really remember. I think it was memories. You know, I can't remember much from Newmoon. I remember I opened a door and I saw something because it made me throw up and that's when I got cornered, but I don't remember what it was."

May mulled that over. "Maybe...maybe it's shock. You just went numb and forgot it all." She frowned and hugged herself. "I wish that could happen to me. You're lucky."

"Oh, May." Dawn sighed and put a hand on her shoulder. May was right, she was lucky that she didn't remember any of the horrible images she had seen. Not in her conscious mind, at least. "Do you want to talk about it yet? What's going through your head?"

"Not right now." May glanced over. "They're trying to figure out where the orbs are."

"Has Ash said anything about them yet?"

"He's still asleep down there I think." May nodded her head a little farther toward the tunnel. "Misty's on watch. Not like Ash would know much more than us anyway. Doesn't work that way."

Dawn nodded her head. She was almost tempted to point out that May was much more talkative than yesterday, and that was a good sign, but didn't want to jinx it. Instead, she got up and brushed her skirt, heading over to the others. She heard May following her, but kept her attention on the map of Unova. "Did you guys figure anything out?"

"We figured out that Virizion probably has the grass orb," Iris answered. "The problem is, she could be anywhere."

"Cobalion or Terrakion could have the fighting one," Cilan added. "They're both partial types like Virizion. Well, Keldeo is too but I doubt it'd be him. He's much younger than the others."

"We thought that flying could be Yveltal," Gary said, "because there are probably some orbs in Kalos, but then I thought about Tornadus and he's the only known pure flying type. It'd make sense for him to have it. Also, Genesect is the only known bug legendary Pokémon."

"We know where they are," Cilan interrupted. "Absentia Natural Park."

"Misty said that Fire, Ice and Electric were around Shamouti Island," Dawn reminded them. "So if these are right, that leaves..."

"Fairy, Dragon and Water," Leaf spoke up from her spot beside Iris.

"Fairy's probably in Kalos since that's where that type originated," Gary theorized. "I doubt there's only one there, so even though Dragon is more prominent in Unova, I'm betting it's over in Kalos too. And Water..." He trailed off, fully aware that the orb could have been absolutely anywhere in the world. It may have been in the ocean or in a stream, maybe even in a remote lake. It was hard to tell.

"So where do we go first?"

They all stared at one another unsurely.

"One thing at a time. We need to get out of here first—" Gary's words were cut off by Clemont's triumphant yell.

Serena jerked up from where she was sleeping and stared at her friend with wide eyes. "Huh?"

"Sorry," he said sheepishly, scratching his cheek. "But I figured it out. We're into the traffic grid so we should be able to plan a way to get out of the city!"

"Someone should get Misty and wake Ash up. They won't want to miss this."

...

The plan was simple. Wait until it was dark and sneak to a place and, unfortunately, steal a couple SUVs to get all of them around. Before that though, they needed a group to go up into the city and get some more supplies.

Dawn was quick to volunteer, pointing out that she didn't have any sort of wanted poster and reward out for her. Cilan agreed to go with her as a guide. It was just going to be the two of them,

but Misty absolutely wasn't having that.

Misty didn't do well with being underground, let alone in a smelly sewer. With Ash still asleep and Iris on guard duty, she insisted on going with them, just in case. Gary, Serena and Dawn didn't like the idea, but she wasn't taking no for an answer. They compromised by letting her go, but only after decking her out in a disguise.

She would have felt normal with the cap hiding her orange hair, but the fake glasses that she wore were strange. Misty never considered someday needing something to aid in her eyesight, and she honestly hoped that she didn't have to.

Breaking out of her thoughts, Misty realized that she needed to keep her focus on the here and now because if she didn't, Cilan and Dawn were definitely going to draw attention to themselves. Though she didn't know Cilan very well, Misty was aware of just how eccentric he could be. He had been rather subdued like the rest of them, but even his paranoid movements were rather eccentric. He looked so paranoid that they were getting odd stares. It didn't help that Dawn, in order to hide her nerves, seemed overly cheerful to the point of being fake.

"You two need to calm down," Misty hissed as she hugged her jacket closer to her. "Just act like normal." It was sad that the norm was slightly jittery, though the people of Castelia City seemed generally okay, walking around with shopping bags and excitedly talking to one another.

"Sorry, I'm just nervous," Dawn admitted, bouncing on the heels of her feet.

"You could try to focus on something else for a while. Helps me," Misty suggested.

The younger girl looked up at the sky thoughtfully before glancing at their male companion. "Hey, Cilan?"

His bright green eyes slowly turned away from the people he was scanning to her. "Hmm?"

"Where are your brothers? I'm surprised they weren't with you," Dawn noted, her voice innocently curious.

Misty instantly knew that she had said the wrong thing. Thinking back, Ash had mentioned that Cilan was a triplet with two brothers, but they hadn't even crossed her mind. Now she felt bad about that. From the way his fingers curled into fists and his body tensed, Misty had a good idea of what had happened.

"Leave it," Cilan said in an uncharacteristic mutter.

"Sorry," Dawn said, taking a step back from him. Her eyes were wide with surprise. "I was just..."

"Leave it!" Cilan repeated snapped.

"Don't snap at her!" Misty stepped in between the two of them. "She didn't do anything wrong!"

Cilan instantly looked down, shame seeping through his entire posture. "I know. I'm sorry Dawn. I just...sorry."

Dawn fidgeted a bit. "It's okay. I'll just..." She trailed off as they went around one of the corners.

"You know what, I have the list of what we need. You two wait here while I run to the store."

"Dawn!" Misty called out as she ran, but the younger girl didn't pay attention to them. She shifted a bit beside Cilan, an awkward silence creeping up between them. A part of her wanted to run after

Dawn but this was their entire plan from the beginning: for only one of them to go in while the others waited.

"My brothers might be dead and I don't know."

Misty blinked up at Cilan as she slowly processed what he said. "What?"

"Iris escaped Oplucide City, and I went to meet her half way." He hugged his arms to himself. "When we got back to the gym, it was a mess and my brothers...my brothers were gone." Cilan's green eyes looked up towards the sky. "There were signs of a struggle and there was blood but I don't know what happened to them or where they are." He sighed. "I didn't mean to snap at Dawn."

"You just don't know what to do with those emotions, I get it," Misty said, looking towards the store where Dawn was. "Team Rocket killed my sisters. Well, I assume they did. I don't actually know either." She shook her head. "They didn't survive that tsunami in Cerulean."

"I heard about that just before everything went dark." Cilan hesitated for a moment. "How do you deal with it? I wouldn't have noticed. You're so put together. Not like me. I'm a mess. I'm not like me anymore."

Misty slowly shook her head, not meeting his eyes. "I've just...they're gone and there's nothing I can do about it." She shrugged. "I still have Ash though. I can keep him safe even though I couldn't keep them safe."

"Ash," Cilan repeated his friend's name. There was something about the way he said the name that made Misty look at him oddly. "Sorry, it's just...it's hard not to notice how bad he is right now and how – no it's none of my business I apologize."

"No, say what's on your mind. Nobody else will."

"I just..." Cilan trailed off. "I'm not sure that's really coping. You know, just focusing on Ash because you feel like you couldn't save them. It's deflecting the problem."

"I—I'm coping," Misty stuttered, her hands curling into fists as a bit of rage started to rise up in her. "Why is taking care of my sick boyfriend a problem? He's all I've got left."

"No, no, it's not." Cilan held up his hands in surrender. "That's fine it's just...if it's because he's all you have left...that says a lot." Though he was older, he looked ready to bolt at the first sign that her anger was going to explode outwardly. "Do you ever think that it might be...no never mind that is overstepping boundaries."

Despite the fact that she was angry, Misty found herself wanting to hear what he had to say. "Tell me."

"It's just when dealing with people, we sometimes protect them and that makes things worse. I started to do that with Iris after—after my brothers..." He cleared his throat and looked down. "She didn't let me but Ash, from what you guys said happened, he would have been all too willing to lean on someone. You're the only one of us that really gets a real reaction from him now. Pikachu barely does anymore. He's probably just sitting down there like he's in a coma. That isn't healing." He shook his head. "You can love him, he can love you, and you can support each other, but I don't think sheltering him is going to protect or heal him in the long run."

Though still a bit angry, Misty started to feel almost sick. Instinctively she wanted to argue. She wanted to lash out at Cilan to tell him that he was wrong. The more she thought about it though, the more she realized that he might be right. "So by...coddling him...I'm not going to help him?"

"I don't actually know," Cilan admitted, looking over Misty's shoulder and waving at Dawn as she exited the store. "People are different. Maybe it is good for you guys, I don't know, but maybe it's not what you guys need as a whole. Maybe you need everyone else too."

Misty crossed her arms in front of her. "Ash always did love having a lot of people around him." She paused. "I'm sorry about your brothers, Cilan."

"I'm sorry about your sisters too."

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"We should go here first!"

"No way, we should definitely go this way!"

Dawn raised an eyebrow as they walked back towards where their friends were hiding. Cilan sighed and shook his head while Misty mumbled something about them being subtle. They walked around the corner and found everyone gathered around the map, Gary and Iris practically spitting at each other's face from anger.

Ash was leaning against the wall, watching everyone rather intently, though not participating. He was brushing his fingers through Pikachu's fur, something the little Pokémon was clearly enjoying. Ash tilted his head towards them as they came into the room, the only one to notice that they returned.

Misty shifted slightly next to Dawn, and the younger girl frowned when she looked over at her. On one hand, Misty looked like she clearly wanted to go over to Ash, but on the other she seemed to be stopping herself.

Finally, Misty made her way over to him, kneeling down beside him. Dawn watched as Ash said something quietly, and Misty's face turned red. She hauled the glasses off and pouted at him. A very small smile appeared on Ash's face as he poked her cheek gently.

"What's going on?" Cilan asked as he came forward, setting the bags on the ground.

Gary opened his mouth to answer but Iris got through to him first. "We decided that Cobalion probably has the fighting orb since he's the leader of the Swords of Justice. It's rumoured that he makes his home in Mistralton Cave. I was saying that we should go there first but Gary-bear here seems to think that we should go to the White Forest first."

"White Forest?" Cilan asked curiously.

"We figured that it's the best place to look for Tornadus. The Abundant Shrine is said to be where Landorus appears and that's the only real place attached to any of the Weather Trio," Iris pointed out. "My problem is that Team Plasma is way more active on that side of Unova."

"It makes more sense to go there first. Get it out of the way before more shit happens to make us weaker," Gary argued with her. "The National Park is between the two so it doesn't really matter land wise and it'll take almost the same amount of time to get to both spots."

"Have you ever been to Unova before?" Iris shot at him. "I didn't think so. I know what I'm talking about!"

"How long has this been going on?" Dawn asked, turning her attention to where May, Serena, Clemont and Leaf were sitting together, silently watching the exchange.

"Since not long after you left. First it was about the fact that we have no idea where the grass orb could be and now it's this," Serena answered with a sigh. She glanced down at Clemont's computer. "We need to get out of here soon."

"No kidding. Them arguing is going to get us caught." Dawn nodded at Iris and Gary. "We could hear you from way down that way."

"We should wait until night," Clemont spoke up. "I was able to check past recordings and it's always pretty dark at night. We can just wear simple disguises and people probably won't look at us twice. We should go in groups though. All of us together would look suspicious."

"We don't have much time left," May spoke up almost hesitantly. "That's why Giratina brought us here, right? Won't it take too long to travel up there?"

"Maybe Giratina could take us to the next place?"

"No." That answer came from Leaf. "It's too risky. The more people with knowledge on Giratina, the more Yung can use to make his Mirage Pokémon. That's how it works, right?"

May nodded her head in agreement.

"What do you think, Ash? Which place should we go to first?"

Everyone's attention shifted back to the other group where Iris had swung around to look at the boy in question.

Ash stared at her like a Deerling caught in headlights. He shifted, reaching up and tugging his hat down to cover his eyes a bit more. "I don't know."

"Come on now you must have—."

"I don't know!" It was the loudest he had been for a while, genuine anger creeping into his voice. Iris stared at him, and his shoulders slumped, that confidence leaving him. "I don't."

"It's okay." Misty put her hand on his shoulder, cringing a bit as Cilan looked at her. She looked over at Ash and couldn't help but wonder if he was right. What if she was doing more harm than good? Did he really need her to speak up like that or was she just doing it to comfort herself? To tell herself that she was saving someone to try and make up for the guilt of her sisters? Misty didn't want to think about it.

"I don't want to choose anymore," Ash said, keeping his voice low so that only Misty and Pikachu could hear him. "All of my choices lead to someone getting hurt."

Misty glanced down at Pikachu, who looked back up at her sadly. Maybe Clemont was right in the long run, but for right now, he still did need some comfort and she could give him that.

"Mistralton Cave is probably our best bet to start with." Cilan said while pointing at the map. "It is a bit closer and the bridge is shorter."

"Why is the bridge being shorter a factor?"

"Because, all the bridges are being monitored by Team Plasma. The less we're around one, the better. We'll probably need vehicles to get up there though." Cilan put a finger to his chin. "Maybe we could rent a couple?"

"That leaves a paper trail," Leaf spoke up, startling them. "You can't do that."

"So what? We steal them?"

Leaf sighed and stared down at her hands. Gary groaned a bit, looking up at the ceiling before saying a single word. "Yes."

...

It was either too risky or they were far too paranoid, but it was decided that sending Dawn, Cilan and Misty up again was a bad idea. Instead, they had to send two people who could drive and had the knowhow to steal a car in the first place. Somehow, that ended up being Clemont and Leaf.

Clemont reminded everyone that he couldn't legally drive, though he certainly knew how, but he also knew that if there were electronics in any of the vehicles they took, he'd have to be the one to disable them.

As for Leaf, she didn't seem incredibly happy with the decision that she would go up, but refused to let Gary go up for reasons she chose to keep to herself. So with disguises in place, she and Clemont made their way up to the streets.

Her brown eyes glanced towards her companion. The last time they had been paired up together felt like it happened years ago but in reality only a couple days had gone by. She felt something well up in her chest, like something was trying to tell her that it was the reason she needed to go with him, like they had unfinished business.

So they walked along the sidewalks of the abandoned streets, hand-in-hand to make people think that they were just a normal couple, not about-to-be car thieves. Clemont had been incredibly jittery about that at first, but all it took was a roll of her eyes and grabbing his hand to make him calm down.

A screamed echoed in the air, followed by the same voice laughing a moment later as a group of teenage girls hurried by them. Despite this, Clemont flinched at the sound and then glared at the girls. They were the same age, but somehow this group just seemed so much younger.

Leaf glanced over at him, concern stretching across her features. He shook his head and said, "Sorry, I just..."

"You just?"

Clemont hesitated before saying, "I hear them screaming in my sleep."

"You—" Leaf abruptly cut herself off, her eyes going wide. "Oh! I'm sorry! I was there too but—."

"Don't apologize." Clemont shook her head. "I didn't want you to hear it too. It was the least I could do after you saved me." He paused, looking thoughtfully up at the sky. "Leaf? I'll be fast this time. I promise."

Leaf looked towards the sky. "It's...that whole day was a mess. I know what I did and I know I had to do it, but it still hurts. What happened wasn't your fault either. We're teenagers fighting against an army of monsters." She stopped and let go of his hand. "You know, you're the smartest person I've ever met, but there are a lot of smart people in the world and they've probably recruited a lot. You did your best and because you got the power off you saved lives that would have been lost otherwise. You helped save me because I'm not strong like you. I wouldn't be able to handle the screams too." Leaf turned around to look at him, a bittersweet smile crossing her lips. "So none of

this pity party, okay?"

A startled expression crossed his face. Clemont stared at her for a moment before laughing slightly. "Thank you." He smiled. "Come on, the others are counting on us. Let's go steal a car."

Leaf snorted. "Never thought you'd say that, did you?"

"No way," he agreed, holding his arm out this time. She looped hers through his and they walked towards the dealership they targeted earlier.

It didn't take long to get to the second hand shop. With Clemont breaking into the street cameras, and using different maps, they located a place where they could steal a couple cars without being caught on camera. It was going to be difficult, but Clemont was sure they could do it.

Leaf looked around, carefully studying the area around them. Once she was sure that there was no one on the dark street, she nodded to Clemont and they both hurried over to the car lot. She felt bad about stealing, but she rationalized this by thinking that she'd probably feel worse if the world ended.

The two of them crept into the car lot, and quickly looked around for two vehicles that could move everyone. Luckily, the owner of this place was organized and had all the SUVs in one spot. Clemont looked one over and said, "No car alarm on this one. Seems dangerous in this neighbourhood."

"Whatever, I'll take any break we can get," Leaf said as she jimmied the lock on the door. She hesitated a little bit, waiting to see if some alarm Clemont couldn't find would go off, but nothing did. She got the door open and he confirmed that the second one was okay to touch, so she went to open that. Clemont hurried back to the first one to hotwire it, doing the same to the second one and getting in. Leaf got into the first SUV and looked at the gas gauge. "We'll need to stop somewhere to get fuel."

"Let's just put as much distance between this city and us as we can before someone notices we're gone," Clemont called out to her, nerves creeping through his voice. Not only were they stealing two vehicles, but he wasn't even legally allowed to drive, even if he knew how.

"Just relax and enjoy the fact that you can now put grand theft auto on your resume."

...

It was late at night when the call came through. It left their growing communications room in an excited tizzy that confused Lance at first, but the second he took the call in his office, he knew exactly why they were so excited.

"Wallace," Lance said, staring at the screen with a stoic expression that hid his surprise.

"Lance, it sounds almost like you were expecting me," Wallace replied dryly. He shook his head and got straight to the point. "What's the status there? We've been able to get Magma and Aqua on the run here. Heavy losses though."

"Johto's still secure and we've made progress in Kanto," Lance said, keeping it rather vague since he didn't know how secure the line was. "What kind of heavy losses have you dealt with?"

"You must have noticed the weather or heard rumours of new casts at least. Kyogre and Groudon are both dead. Outside of Sootopolis though, there hasn't been any major loss of human life. Sinnoh's a different story though."

This time, Wallace saw the surprise flit around Lance's face and realized that Cynthia hadn't gotten in touch with the Kanto Champion. He tried to hide his amusement of this. "I don't want to discuss much on this line, who knows who might be listening. Cynthia mentioned something interesting though. A certain Pokémon trainer was here and over there, and apparently he has a way to end this madness. Someone we're both familiar with."

"Who?"

"It brings up more questions than anything else, but how did you end up losing your golden boy, Lance?"

It took Lance a moment to understand what Wallace meant, and this time there was absolutely no way to hide his shock.

...

"No, you're not supposed to—ugh way to miss the turn off!" Iris growled, leaning back in the passenger seat and crossing her arms in front of her, looking out the window with a scowl.

"Maybe if someone would give me directions more than two seconds before we were supposed to turn it wouldn't be a problem!" Gary snapped back at her, his fingers curling around the steering wheel with anger. Luckily, there wasn't much traffic on the road this early in the morning, so he didn't worry about hitting anyone else with his sudden u-turn. The second SUV was following them with Leaf driving, and skidded a bit as she hit the brakes and followed them back.

"How'd we get stuck in this car?" Serena leaned close to Misty to whisper to her, not wanting to infuriate the two in the front.

Misty rolled her eyes. "Bet Leaf's cursing up a storm in the other car."

Serena snickered a bit at the mental image of how Cilan, Clemont, May and Dawn would be dealing with that.

On Serena's other side, Ash woke with a start. He looked around, blinking with confusion at Serena. When he had fallen asleep, Misty had been beside him. "Huh? Where are we?"

"About to go over the bridge to Driftveil," Misty told him, leaning forward to stare at him. "When Gary and I switched drivers earlier, we couldn't wake you up so we figured it was easier for Serena and I to switch."

"Oh okay." He didn't seem all that worried about it, distracted by Pikachu, who climbed up Ash's shirt and nuzzled his face. He smiled at the Pokémon, scratching his ear. "What are they arguing about anyway?" He nodded towards the front seats.

"I'm surprised you slept through it. All they've been doing is fighting since Gary and Misty switched back," Serena answered dryly. She nudged him gently. "Then again, you've always been good at sleeping through things."

Ash smiled slightly and then looked out the window as they drove onto the bridge, tightening his grip on Pikachu.

"Everyone's disguises are on, right?" Gary asked, glancing over his shoulder briefly. "It'll only take a minute to get to the checkpoint." They were banking on disguises and early morning fatigue at the checkpoint that was supposed to be there. Stopping to get gas, a couple chatty boys had been willing to give Serena, Iris and Misty the tidbit that traffic to the east had been immense lately,

since there was so much fighting in the west and most people were trying to get away from it. Early in the morning, the people working barely even checked who was going over the bridges.

They were all just praying that luck was still on their side.

"Pikachu," Ash muttered quietly to the Pokémon, who nodded and climbed underneath the seat to hide. No reason to let Plasma know they had Pokémon with them. He then leaned against the window and closed his eyes.

"Pretend to be asleep," Misty whispered as she slumped down against the other window and nudged Serena, who dropped her head down onto Ash's shoulder in an attempt to look like she had fallen asleep on his shoulder. Ash opened an eye and looked at her with amusement as he watched Misty then lean on Serena like they were a set of dominos that toppled over.

"Show time," Iris mumbled as Gary started to slow down at the roadblock, rolling down his window.

"Where are you all heading to?" A rather tired-sounding man asked them, glaring around the SUV carefully.

"Everything's shit out east so we decided to take a road trip," Gary answered with a charming smile that Iris mimicked beside him. In the back, Ash, Serena and Misty all feigned sleep, but were listening to the conversation carefully. Pikachu was tense under the seat, ready to attack if he needed too.

"Any Pokémon on you?"

"Left 'em at the Marvelous Bridge."

He nodded his head and yawned. "Alright, keep going." He waved towards the others working there, and they all moved out of the way.

"Thank you!" Iris chirped happily as Gary pulled forward. He rolled up his window again. They waited until they were away from the bridge and everyone exhaled at the same time, the three in the back sitting up again.

"That was too easy," Misty mumbled.

"Probably," Gary agreed. "That's why we need to get to the Mistralton Cave."

"Good thing we came this way," Iris spoke up, leaning back in her seat. Gary's green eyes flickered towards her briefly and he shook her head, not saying anything. He knew Iris was right and that he shouldn't have argued as much as he had, he just couldn't help it. He didn't know Iris, and though he knew she was Ash's friend, he couldn't help but feel protective over everyone.

Ignoring the exchange in the front of the vehicle, Serena twisted around to look behind them. She sighed in relief and said, "The others got through too."

Pikachu popped back up from under the seat, nuzzling his way into Ash's arms and situating himself so that he was comfortable.

"That's good," Misty agreed. "How long will it take to get to the cave?"

"Not very long," Iris said, frowning as she watched snowflakes start to fall. "Unless it starts to snow too much. We need to go off of the main roads and take the trails, so it could get tough. At

least this isn't the east. That's a frozen tundra now from what I've heard."

"Lovely," Gary said with a groan, his fingers gripping the wheel tighter. "Here's hoping it doesn't get too bad."

"It will just because you said that," Ash muttered, staring out the window. Pikachu shook his head forlornly.

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"Some days I really do understand why Iris hates snow," Cilan said as he narrowed his eyes as he watched the heavy snowflakes assault the windshield.

Leaf didn't acknowledge his statement, though she certainly agreed. Instead, she kept her eyes glued to the road in front of her. She tensed when the SUV in front of them started to fishtail, but Gary seemingly got it under control, straightening out.

"We should get off of the road soon," May spoke up from the back, unable to hide the nerves in her voice.

"None of the walkie talkies worked," Clemont reminded her. "So we have no way to talk to the others. They might not notice if we stop."

"We can't be that far from the Mistralton Cave." Dawn leaned forward in her seat. "We've been driving for forever now." She looked across May and at Clemont.

He shook his head. "I got nothing right now. GPS is down and it won't help us much out here anyway."

In the passenger seat, Cilan folded the map over so that he could look at it without getting in Leaf's way. "Hmm...judging by how long we've been driving, taking the fact that we had to slow down into consideration, we should probably be getting there sooner rather than later."

"Thank you," May sighed. She looked over at Dawn and mumbled, "My butt feels numb." Dawn stifled a giggle and nudged her gently.

"Shit!" Leaf cursed, slamming on the brakes as the other vehicle suddenly jerked around, spinning off down a perpendicular path. They skidded a bit, nearly missing the path. She hesitated, watching the other vehicle go until it was out of sight. "We really need those walkie talkies up and running again."

"When we get to a stable power source for more than five minutes we can fix that," Clemont replied dryly.

"We don't want to lose them," Cilan spoke up, reminding Leaf that they needed to move. The brunette cursed under her breath but maneuvered the SUV around so they could follow their friends.

The path that they were on was bumpy, winding and narrow. Though Leaf was the one actually driving, all of them were on edge, staying still as if that made a difference. The wind seemed to pick up, nearly blinding them with snow as it shook the SUV.

"This is a horrible idea," Dawn all but squeaked, holding onto the handle above her door.

"Remind me to punch Gary when we stop." Leaf glowered at the road.

Cilan squinted, green eyes studying the rising mound that they were driving around. "You know...I think this is it. This is Mistraltion Cave."

Everyone else, even Leaf, glanced over at the hills beside them. The driver quickly turned her eyes back to the road. "They better find the entrance soon before we crash."

....

The second that the SUV stopped, Serena swung around and started tossing the bags up front so that everyone could get their winter jackets out again, smiling apologetically when her sudden motion startled Pikachu. She thought that the last time that they were going to need them was back in Sinnoh but of course it was too good to be true. The weather was unpredictable at best these days.

At least they knew that there would be another Kyogre and Groudon to help balance things out again, as long as they managed to stop Giovanni from creating his own Arceus.

Iris bundled herself in a sweater and then in her heavy jacket, curling her scarf around her neck before shoving her hands into gloves.

"It'll probably be warmer the farther we get into the cave," Gary said as he pulled on his own coat. "Here's hoping this is the right one."

"It's right," Iris snapped, though her fierce tone was lost to her chattering teeth. "I'm sure of it."

They all looked towards the ominous opening that they parked as close to as they dared, no one moving to get out of the vehicle yet. Misty shifted when she saw the others pull up. "Leaf's probably furious."

"I'll take that," Gary replied. He didn't say it, but they all knew they were thinking the same thing. It would be the closest thing to normal she had been since Sinnoh.

"Let's go," Misty said, glancing over at Serena and nodded to Ash.

The blonde nodded and turned around, nudging that still silent trainer. "Budge up." Ash just sighed and opened the door, wincing at the onslaught of cold air. He unzipped his jacket slightly, allowing Pikachu to crawl inside before he zipped it up under the Pokémon's chin. He hauled on his backpack and looked up at the cave warily.

"Are you sure this is the right spot?" Leaf called out to Gary as the others piled out of their own SUV.

"Blame Iris if it's not!"

Iris glared at him as she hugged herself.

"Ash?" May spoke up almost hesitantly, "can you feel it?"

He shifted uncomfortably, his mind wandering back to the orb that he knew was sitting in the Pinwheel Forest. Ash could say no, something strange inside of him urged him to do just that. They took a big risk at coming out here in this storm though. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath trying to ignore the sting of the cold air as the snow whipped against his skin.

He opened his eyes and focused on May rather than on the fact that everyone was looking at him. "It's here."

There was a sigh of relief and Iris scurried towards the cave, eager to get out of the storm.

"You know, Unova is so weird," Misty commented as they walked inside. "It was nice, and then we went through a warm desert, and then into a snowstorm. How does that even work?"

"Ocean currents and jet streams," Cilan answered. He might have gone into more detail, but just breathing in the cold air made his throat burn.

The group made their way inside of the cave, shaking off the snow that already accumulated on their clothes, Misty reached out and touched Ash's shoulder. "Which way do we go?"

He grimaced and looked around. The tunnels spread out in several directions, all of them dark and foreboding. Pikachu shifted a bit in his coat, and that movement was enough to snap him out of his thoughts. It was cold where they were standing, and he didn't want to be there any more than anyone else did. "It feels like it's everywhere but..." He looked to his right. The energy felt less 'muffled' down that way, like there were less rocks and natural aura running through to interfere with it.

"That way it is," Gary decided, pulling a flashlight out of his bag and starting down the tunnel when no one else moved to go first.

"So I have a question about these orbs," Cilan spoke up. "You mentioned that you first encountered them on Shamouti Island, right Misty?"

"Yeah?"

"And they played a part of the Chosen One and were able to remove them? But if the real Chosen One doesn't take them, they vanish back to their shrine?"

"Right."

"So what happens if one of us takes it and gives it to Ash? Will it still vanish?"

They all paused and stared at Cilan before exchanging uncertain looks. Clemont looked back to Ash. "Arceus said it had to be you, right?"

"Yeah."

"But what if the shrine's destroyed?" May wondered, more to herself than anything else.

Ash looked back at her, those thoughts swirling through his head. Was it possible, despite what Arceus specifically told him, that someone else could have brought the orbs to him if they could have met up within 24 hours of removing them from their locations? Nearly two months ago, he might have argued that, casting doubt that Arceus would ever manipulate him in such a way, but now he could see it all much clearly. Yes, Arceus would have done exactly that.

"What does it matter?" Gary spoke up. "We're all here, and I don't know about you, but I don't want to take chances that we'll get out of here only for it to disappear again. Let's just keep going." He started walking again, nudging Ash a bit to get him moving.

Conversation was sparse, as their voices would echo and everyone wanted to be cautious. Though a storm raged outside and no one had seen any other vehicles outside, none of them wanted to take any chances that someone from Team Plasma might have been snooping around the caverns. Though there was nothing they could do to hide the sounds of their boots crunching across the rough ground beneath their feet.

"Careful." Misty grabbed Ash's sleeve and shone her flashlight beside him where the tunnel turned into a steep slope that disappeared somewhere in the darkness below. Behind them, May and Dawn took a step towards the solid wall that they knew was there.

Watching out for the slopes that branched up and down every once in a while into apparent pits of nothingness, the cavern in and of itself didn't seem particularly complicated to get through. Gary only stopped a handful of times to ask Ash which way to go. The more difficult challenge was getting a straight answer out of the raven-haired boy, who seemed to be almost trying to make himself smaller with every step. Somehow he ended up walking at the front of the group, flashlight in hand.

Pikachu looked up at his trainer with worried eyes. He couldn't sense anything wrong, but it was clear that there was something bothering Ash. He climbed out of his cozy resting place, retreating to his normal perch on Ash's shoulder, nuzzling his cheek against his trainer's cold skin. Ash reached up, brushing his fingers through Pikachu's fur before retreating to zip up his own coat. It might not have been as cold in the caverns as it was outside, but it didn't feel like summer either.

Dawn's hand twitched and she raised it up to put it on his shoulder, but a harsh glare from Misty stopped her. The older girl shook her head sternly, a sign to leave him be. Cilan watched the entire scene, and when Misty happened to glance his way, he raised an eyebrow. Her cheeks turned red and she turned away with a silent huff.

Ash stopped, staring down at the floor with wide eyes. Pikachu's ears fell.

"Ash! Give some warning next time!" Iris cried out as she walked right into him. He didn't say anything, and she pouted a bit, walking to face him, but froze when she saw what he was staring at.

In the light of his flashlight illuminated the floor and the blood that was on it in large splotches. Iris turned around, flashing her own light to see if there was anything anywhere else, her stomach twisting when she noticed that there were dots on the floor behind them. No one had noticed until there was a lot.

"What the hell?" Gary muttered. He looked towards Leaf, but she was staring down at the floor with wide eyes, practically hugging herself. Realizing he wasn't going to get an answer from her, he looked around to see if anyone could make a guess. They were all clueless.

"Ash," Cilan spoke up. "I don't know what that was, but we need to keep going. Something might need our help." He didn't move until Cilan put a hand on his shoulder, jerking forward slightly and just moving like a toy that had been wound up and released.

Pikachu shook his head and was about to speak up, to break the heavy silence, but froze as a distinct, awful scent reached his nose and his hair stood on end. The sound that escaped his mouth made everyone's hair stand on end.

It took only a moment more of walking for the smell to hit everyone else too. Ash's arm was shaking so badly that the beam of light from his flashlight moved visibly across the ground, slowly making its way up to the source of the smell.

Immediately, Ash jerked back, dropping the flashlight to the floor. He bumped into Misty, who grabbed his arm and held tightly, staring at the object the fallen light illuminated.

Cobalion laid out on the floor in dried and congealed blood. No one dared to move, not sure what to say or do.

Surprisingly, it was Ash that moved first. He took a single step forward, but then hurried, falling to his knees in the blood that was still on the floor. With shaking hands, he took off his gloves and reached out, putting them on the cold Pokémon's fur.

"Ash," Misty muttered to him, walking up behind him. "You can't heal him."

"I can. I can heal him. I can do it." His voice hitched almost hysterically.

Misty pulled her hand back to her chest, not sure what to say or do as she watched Ash try to heal the long-deceased Pokémon.

"Ash. You need to get the orb," Serena spoke up, walking forward and putting a hand on his shoulder. She looked up and Misty, who slowly nodded.

"She's right. You can't help Cobalion, but you can get that."

"I have to heal him! I can't...I can't let someone else die."

"He's already dead!" Misty snapped and then instantly regretted it. Her expression softened and she tried to reach out to him, but he pushed her hand away and shrugged Serena off too.

Ash shook his head wildly before looking beyond Cobalion's body at the looming shrine. He gritted his teeth and stood up, storming towards it and reaching in. He snatched the orb from inside. "Happy? I have the stupid orb."

"Ash..." Misty muttered sadly.

"We should bury him," Iris interrupted any sort of argument that could arise. "I can get Excadrill to make the hole. Please?" She turned her eyes to Ash. "We can't just leave him here."

Ash covered his face with his hands and shook his head, his despair palpable.

"No one else was supposed to die."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

What Makes And Breaks Us

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



May wiped the sweat away from her brow, staring down at the freshly packed dirt in front of them. Though Iris' Excadrill was the one to actually dig the hole that they gently placed Cobalion in, everyone else decided to help push the dirt back over him themselves.

Something heavy weighed down in May's stomach as she looked up from the dirt and around at everyone else. Was this what could have happened if Dawn hadn't stopped her back on Newmoon Island? Could she have ended someone's life and forced someone else to mourn even more than they were now. Most of them didn't have any sort of bond to Cobalion beyond the fact that he was a creature whose life was torn away from him, yet it still hurt. She knew from experience what it felt like to lose something very important, and this was nothing in comparison.

She didn't want anyone to feel this way, let alone losing someone they cared for. She didn't want to be responsible for that ever.

"What do you think happened to him?" she kept her voice low, not directing her question at any one person in particular.

"Fear," Cilan answered after a moment, and she looked up at him curiously. "What I mean is he was...hurt somewhere else and came back here." They realized that the trail of blood they found earlier must have belonged to the poor Pokémon. "The wounds weren't...natural. Not made by a Pokémon. Those were bullets. A person did this, not a Pokémon or a battle."

"It wouldn't have been Team Plasma then," Iris pointed out. "They would have tried to capture him."

"Yeah," Cilan agreed. "That's why I think...it was just a person. Probably one of those gun-loving lunatics that shouldn't have them. People are terrified by the legendary Pokémon. They don't know that it's not the legendary Pokémon helping Team Plasma and all the other ones. Someone probably saw him and shot him."

May hugged herself at the thought. It was just senseless violence, plain and simple.

They left the shrine room, setting up a camp halfway between there and the opening of the cave system so that neither the cold air nor the putrid smell of blood would bother them. A small fire was built for light and warmth, and they broke out small rations of food along with their warm sleeping bags.

May's blue eyes looked up towards Ash as he set his food down after only a bite. He nudged it towards Pikachu, who shook his head at first, but at his trainer's silent urging, eventually took the food for himself.

Ash's skin was pale, yet in the flickering light of the fire, he seemed slightly green too. There were dark circles under his eyes, though May was willing to bet that she looked just as tired and bad as her friend did.

She doubted Ash would be getting any sleep, even as he curled up in his sleeping bag without saying a word to anyone. Pikachu climbed in beside him once he was done eating. The Pokémon closed his eyes, but from the way one ear would twitch every once in a while, it was obvious that he was still semi-conscious at least.

"What now?" Serena asked quietly, not wanting to disturb the silence.

"Wait out the storm, head towards the next spot," Gary answered, grimacing a bit. His words sounded heartless even to him. "There's nothing we can do here, and if someone does happen to come by, our cars are pretty conspicuous where we left them."

"We'll need to ditch those sooner rather than later anyway," Clemont added. "They'll have run the plates through the system by now. Probably even when we went over the bridge so they know the general direction we were going in."

"We'll take them off for now," Leaf said. "No less suspicious but better than nothing. I don't feel like stealing another car." She paused. "You know, if we were back home, I'd probably be really good at grand-theft-auto by now."

Gary blinked at her, his brow furrowing slightly before his expression relaxed. He smiled and put a hand on her shoulder. There was the Leaf he knew and loved. Or a glimpse of her at least, but he'd take it.

"We all need to get some sleep," Misty said, not even bothering to try and hide her exhaustion. She moved her sleeping bag a little closer to her boyfriend's, crawled inside of it and closed her eyes pointedly.

"She's right," Dawn agreed after a moment of silence. No one could really argue with either girl, and they all knew they needed rest from the night before. No matter what the next day brought, they all needed their energy to take it on.

...

He could hear something dripping, like a tap that wasn't quite turned off all the way. He couldn't tell which way it was coming from, but it bothered him. It was the only thing that he could hear, and with every step that he took it only seemed to get louder.

He stumbled, falling down onto his hands and knees. His hands were in a thick, warm liquid that sent shivers up his spine. He didn't need to lift his hands and look to know that it was blood.

The dripping was closer, and he now knew what it was. Colour started to flood his vision, allowing him to see the area around him though he didn't want to at all. He wanted to close his eyes but

didn't get the chance.

The startled cry got stuck in Ash's throat as he launched himself to his feet and stumbled back. Arceus's red and green eyes stared at him lifelessly, a gnarly wound across his side, red liquid coating the ground around him.

A loud cry echoed around him, and he looked over in time to see a second Arceus looming over them, bright gold light building up in front of him. Ash stumbled away from the injured Arceus, throwing his hands over her eyes. He could feel the heat of the attack around him and tried to block out the anguished cry of the real Arceus.

Then everything went silent.

"What are you doing?"

Ash's eyes shot open. There was something very familiar about that voice, but he couldn't quite place it. He realized that both Arceus were gone. In fact, he was somewhere else entirely.

The wind ruffled his hair as he watched the rough sea in front of him, fire, lightning and ice battling around three islands.

"What are you doing?" the voice repeated.

Ash turned around and took a step back, stumbling back down onto the ground so that he was looking up at the person standing behind him. He was a short boy, with messy black hair, a red and white cap on his head with a distinctive green L in the center. His brown eyes looked down at Ash with confusion and a bit of disgust.

He was looking at himself. Or rather, a younger version of himself. It took him a moment, but he realized that this was the boy that had saved the day at Shamouti Island.

"Get up," the younger Ash said to him.

"What?"

"You heard me."

Ash stared at his younger self. He slowly started to stand up, but the young boy shook his head and crossed his arms. That wasn't what he meant and they both knew it. Ash settled back down.

"I—" Ash stared at him, "I don't know...I don't think I can."

"Of course you can," younger Ash insisted, taking a few steps towards him. "Get up."

"I..." Ash looked at his shaking hands before looking back up at his younger self. "I..."

Younger Ash stared at him, confused for a moment until he shook his head and smiled. He held out his hand and said, "I can do it, so I know you can too."

Ash stared up at him, slowly reaching his hand up. The younger one smiled encouragingly. Ash's hand was almost to his when he panicked, yanking it back towards his chest.

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Ash started awake, staring at the glass of the window he was leaning against with confusion. It took a moment to remember where exactly he was, and why he was there. The moment he did, Ash

curled in on himself a little more and closed his eyes. He took a shuddering breath before opening them again and studying his surroundings. Though the area they were in was no longer completely covered with snow, there was still a layer of frost ruining the plants that shouldn't have been there at this time of year. A distinct sign that something was very wrong with the world.

He looked over his shoulder, a shadow of a smile flickering on his face when he saw Iris leaning against Misty, who was leaning against the other door. Both girls slept peacefully, Pikachu snuggled in between them. They were all safe, content and happy for now. A quick glance behind him, through the rear-view window let him see that the other vehicle was smoothly traveling behind them.

"Gary?"

"Hmm?"

Ash looked at the front of the car, eyes locking onto Serena as she shifted in the passenger seat. She bit her lip, fiddling with her hair like she used to when it was longer. "Do you think that...it's none of my business but...it's about Misty. And Ash."

Ash instinctively slumped down a little bit against the window, closing his eyes so that they were open only a crack. He didn't want anyone to see that he was awake."

"What about them?"

"It was something Cilan said earlier. I never really thought about it before but...do you think they've been really clingy to one another? I mean, as in maybe they're not helping one another anymore? Comfort is one thing but...well...Cilan said that it was more like Misty was projecting her feelings about not being able to protect her sisters onto Ash instead of facing them, and then he hides behind Misty even more instead of dealing with what's happening to him." She shook her head. "I don't want to gossip, I'm just worried."

Gary was silent for a moment, though he made a sound to indicate that he heard her. "Cilan's probably right. It's one thing comforting someone, but I can see what he means." Gary sighed. "We've all had to deal with some serious shit already. Some more than others. We're not really... we shouldn't be dealing with this, but we are. Everyone deals with things their own way but sometimes we deal with things the wrong way. I don't know. I think you're right but I don't know what we could do about that."

"Leaf seems to be getting better," Serena noted.

"So is Clemont," he retorted. "He was there with Leaf. He experienced the same thing. He's strong. They're trying to work it out together and I think that's good for them."

Serena hummed in agreement. "Clemont's always been the type to want to fix things." She leaned back a bit. "Then poor May...it's hard for her but I can see it. She's trying. Misty is just hiding everything, keeping a strong face and that's going to backfire, I know it is. And Ash..." She turned around to look at the boy in question. "I'm worried about him."

"We all are, I've never seen...well that's not true. I've seen Ash's personality do a 180 before. When we were little and I decided to take what happened to my parents out on him and Leaf. He went from happy and helpful to brash and defensive. That's what Ash does. Internalizes things so people don't worry him until they become too much for him." Gary paused. "I've just never seen them become too much for him before."

Serena turned to face the front of the car and Ash opened his eyes. His brow furrowed as his hands clenched into fists. It was strange, because he could hear the wisdom in their words. It made sense to him, but it didn't really feel like they could be talking about him. It was almost like he was a passenger in his own body.

Ash looked up, blinking with surprise when his eyes caught Gary's in the rear-view mirror briefly. The other boy didn't acknowledge the fact that he was awake. Instead he looked back to the road. "Not like there's any therapists around to talk to. They'll make a killing off of us after this is over."

"Maybe not," Serena agreed after a moment, "but that doesn't mean we can't help one another. We have to." Gary glanced at her quickly, but she didn't clarify anything else, seemingly falling back into her thoughts. His eyes once again met Ash's in the mirror before looking at the road.

Ash looked out the window again. For a moment, he could picture the bleeding Arceus and wondered why he hadn't done something. He was well beyond believing that his dreams were just dreams. It meant something. Was it what Gary and Serena were talking about? That they needed to help one another get back up to keep moving forward? Or was it just about him?

Ash crossed his arms in front of him, closing his eyes. He knew that he wasn't okay. Sometimes he didn't get things, he could admit that, but not this. Everything felt so wrong and there was this voice screaming at him when he hesitated, when he let others wander into the unknown first. This was his mission, he should be the one to do it, but no matter how loud that voice got his body didn't listen.

He thought about Arceus. He thought about the blood and how he didn't do anything as the second Arceus loomed over them. He thought about Ritchie. He thought about his younger self and maybe that was who the screaming voice belonged to. The thought of people relying on him made his stomach twist horribly, but the thought of letting people down did the same. It was a perpetual swing of back and forth, not knowing what to do.

Ash could feel his pulse pounding in his head as a headache started to spread. He felt like he was drowning, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could keep struggling to get back to the surface.

He focused on the cool glass of the window, taking a deep breath. He heard Serena shift in her seat, perhaps to look at him, but Ash didn't open his eyes. It didn't really matter if he was awake or asleep anymore, since both his dreams and his reality were made up of nightmares.

...

Dawn tapped her fingers against her thigh as she glanced first to her left and then to her right. Leaf sat on one side of her, staring out the window with a bored expression. May sat on the other side, staring up at the ceiling, lost somewhere else. Cilan was driving and Clemont was looking at a map, meaning that the entire car was silent.

It was driving her crazy.

Dawn hated it. She hated the depressing air that settled around the group. She was well aware of how fortunate she was that her mind spared her from the horrible memories of Newmoon Island. She looked at her friends again, knowing that while she wasn't happy, she didn't have the same nightmares as they did.

"What are you going to do when this is over?" Dawn hadn't even realized that she spoke until everyone but Cilan looked towards her. Her cheeks turned pink and she shrugged. "I just think we should all have a goal in mind for after this is over. Something to work towards." Everyone was

silent, and Dawn mentally struggled. "May, are you going to head to another region for Contests?"

"I..." May trailed off, her blue eyes looking towards the ground, "I don't know. I just...keep thinking about what I almost did, what I made my Pokémon do." She drew invisible images on her jeans with her finger. "I don't know if I can go back."

A heavy silence fell over the car and Dawn wanted to sink into her seat with embarrassment. She hadn't meant to make such a morbid thought come up.

"I'll go home with Bonnie," Clemont explained, "probably keep running my gym and working on inventions. It's strange to think about but if – when we fix this mess, everything will eventually just go back like nothing ever happened." He sighed and shook his head. "Wars happen all the time and though some scars are left on the world people just...forget."

"It'll be hard to forget all of this," Cilan noted, carefully keeping his eyes on the road as they drove. "But we'll try to move beyond it. My brothers and I have a restaurant with our gym. We've been thinking of maybe opening up a chain to go to different cities in Unova."

"What about your gym?" Clemont asked curiously.

"I don't know. There are a lot of gyms in Unova and while we're proud of ours, it would be nice to be able to do other things too. I think I'd like to go up to Opelucid City."

"Isn't that where Iris is training?" Dawn asked, a grin spreading across her lips as she leaned forward.

"Yeah. With Drayden." His eyes flickered to the rearview mirror. "How about you, Leaf?"

Leaf hummed a bit, looking out the window. "You know, I wondered that all my life. When I left home with Ash and Gary, I was excited to travel, to train Pokémon, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do with myself. That's a danger to kids on the road. Then I thought 'hey maybe I'd like to do research' and I did that for a bit. I was actually cataloguing different plants and properties for Professor Oak when I ran into Ash, Dawn, Misty, Brock and Giratina. Listening to Ash talk about battles, watching him and even battling him later on made me rekindle that love for battling. I'd love to take on a Pokémon League, to become a Champion." She looked up at them suddenly, brown eyes positively burning. "I will become a Champion, the same as Ash. We'll help fix everything from the inside so that this never happens again."

"I like that idea," Dawn spoke up after a moment. "I'm sure you'll do it. Ash too. He might be a bit broken now, but we can help him get better." She reached out and put her hand over May's. "We'll help everyone get to where they need to be."

May stared at her for a moment, a ghost of a smile appearing on her face. She opened her mouth to speak but the only sound that came out was a startled scream as Cilan slammed on the breaks to avoid slamming into the other vehicle.

Leaf's arm shot out in front of Dawn as she jerked forward, and the younger girl was grateful for both her seatbelt and her friend's catch. In front of them, Clemont was breathing heavily and Cilan was shaking.

"What the hell was that?" Leaf cried out, one hand still across Dawn while the other grasped the seat in front of her.

Cilan jerked open his door and leaned out to get a better look, eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "Mewtwo?"

....

If there was any doubt that Gary Oak had a very colourful vocabulary, they were immediately put to rest when Mewtwo slammed to the ground in front of the SUV. He slammed on the breaks and the car skidded so that he wouldn't hit the Pokémon. Serena's screamed. Ash, Misty and Iris were jerked violently out of their sleep.

For a moment, everyone just sat there, breathing heavily and staring at the Pokémon. Mewtwo stood before them forebodingly, just staring at them.

"Let me out," Iris said suddenly, a hard edge to her voice. Without waiting for an answer, she threw off her seatbelt and actually climbed over Misty to get out the door. The violet-haired girl stood on the edge of the doorframe to look over the top of the vehicle and furiously asked, "What was that for?"

Mewtwo didn't say anything to her, though the Pokémon's eyes did turn towards the second vehicle as everyone else piled out of it. She observed them for a moment before her head shot back around, vision settling on Ash.

"You were about to go the wrong way," she said, her voice surprising everyone who thought that she was the same Mewtwo they met in the Distortion world. "I've been protecting the last Genesect while waiting for you."

"The last Genesect?" Cilan's voice hiked up in alarm. "There were an entire group of them before."

"Yes, but there are ruthless people in the world who would do anything for power. Whether it be collecting power or destroying it so others can't attain it." She floated up in the air. "Get in your machines, I will show you the way." Everyone stared at her blankly. "Now!" The harshness of her words had everyone scrambling back into the SUVs.

Somehow, in the scramble, Ash ended up in the front seat of the car with Pikachu in his lap. A part of him was relieved, when he spied Misty's worried eyes in the side-view mirror. Serena's worries echoed through his mind and Ash felt like someone punched him in the gut. He hugged Pikachu close to him.

Pikachu looked up at him, patting his arm, before crawling up to his shoulder to grab his seatbelt. A very brief smile appeared on Ash's face as he grabbed the seatbelt from the Pokémon and buckled himself in, Pikachu snuggling close to him afterwards.

The air in the car was tense as they followed Mewtwo, who was flying rather slowly so that they wouldn't lose her. She led them up a winding, twisted trail that was barely safe for vehicles to go through. Ash kept his eyes focused outside the window, staring at the cliffs.

Gary practically draped himself over the steering wheel to see properly so that they wouldn't careen off the side of a cliff. His green eyes flickered with a nervousness that he was desperately trying to hide from everyone else with him.

"Oh Mew," Iris whispered, horror creeping into her voice as she finally got a look at their destination, Absentia Natural Park. The last time she had seen it, it was a beautiful place of high mountains and rising stone pillars with green trees and crystal clear lakes as far as she could see. While it wasn't in complete ruins, she could clearly see the signs of a raging battle. Pillars were destroyed, lakes were polluted and murky, trees were burned, and she couldn't see any Pokémon at all.

Ash sat up straight, and Pikachu's ears drooped. He didn't tear his eyes away from the destruction as they drove down the steep mountain roads to the park below.

As Mewtwo landed on the ground, Gary and Cilan both stopped the SUVs and everyone piled out. Misty reached out to try and put her hand on Ash's shoulder, but he took a step back. Misty's brow furrowed with confusion and slight anger, but he just looked away, unable to hide from her gaze. Pikachu climbed up on his shoulder, and he turned to walk to where Iris and Cilan stood.

"This is terrible," Iris muttered, her eyes watering slightly though her tone was angry. "How could they do this?" Nobody had an answer for her. Cilan silently put his hand on her shoulder, but said nothing.

Ash didn't want to be in the nature park anymore. It felt wrong and empty, though it was hard to feel anything with so many of the glowing, glass orbs that were tucked away in his backpack in the SUV. Their power was almost blinding at the best of times, leaving him with headaches that he stayed silent about.

They were a constant reminder of the bigger picture, and he couldn't deal with it. What he could deal with though, was finding the Genesect that Mewtwo said was there. He couldn't let another legendary Pokémon die. He didn't think he could stand it on a personal level.

The thought of saving the world, of looking at humanity as a whole made it feel like there was a physical weight on his chest. So for now, he forced those thoughts out of his mind and focused on what he could do, help the Pokémon that was in front of him.

His shoulders tensed as his eyes shot open when he finally felt the Pokémon's presence. He knew this Genesect better than the other ones. He felt Mewtwo's eyes on him as he moved forward, skidding down the hill that they were by and ignoring everyone else as they called out to him. He moved to one of the destroyed rock columns and knelt down in front of one of the large grooves that was left behind.

Pikachu jumped off of his shoulder and peaked in, his ears perking up. "Pika! Pi Pikachu!" His tail swished back and forth.

Ash heard the footsteps of his friends and felt the Genesect hesitate to come out. He ignored them though, silently leaning forward a little more so that the hidden Pokémon could see him and holding out his hand. He ignored everyone else, focused on this one thing, because he could coax the Pokémon out.

Slowly, the purple Pokémon crawled out of the space, looking at everyone warily before focusing her attention on Ash. She stared at his outstretched hand before reaching out and putting her clawed paw over his.

"I knew you'd come back," her soft voice whispered in his mind, and Ash got the impression that he was the only one that could hear her. "All the others are gone, we had to protect the orb, and now I'm the Alpha." She sounded so saddened by the idea.

Ash instantly understood. The idea of becoming an Alpha had to be as daunting as being the Chosen One. A sad expression appeared on his face as he studied the Pokémon's injuries. She didn't deserve this.

He reached his other hand out and closed his eyes, focusing on her injuries. Breathing out, he pushed his Aura through her, allowing it to pool around the injuries and heal her. He felt Pikachu pat his leg, the Pokémon knowing more than anyone else that healing always took a lot out of him,

more than he let on. A really bad injury would probably completely drain him.

He opened his eyes in time to see Genesect look at where her wounds once were. She perked up a bit, no doubt because the pain was gone and stared at him, waves of thankfulness and joy rolling off of her. The despair of losing her friends was still there, but holding onto the small bits of light were important.

"Here," Genesect motioned towards the place she had crawled out of. "It's under there. The shrine broke but I still kept it on the shrine's stones so it would count and you could get it." Almost like she could sense the sudden, sick feeling that washed through him, she added, "It'll be okay. Mewtwo will protect you like she protects me." Out of his peripheral vision he saw the Pokémon in question nod, able to hear Genesect when no one else could.

Ash carefully moved under the broken stones, ignoring whatever his friends were telling him. He had to focus on moving forward or he might just jolt backwards and not get the motivation to go again.

He had to reach awkwardly around the stones, a momentary flash of panic hitting him when he thought it was stuck. The knowledge that Mewtwo would help was enough to make him calm down and relax, which in turned allowed him to slip his arm out. The yellow-green orb started to glow brightly and he inhaled sharply before backing up.

The second that he got out, Misty was at his side, worried eyes scanning him over. "Are you okay?"

His brow furrowed. "I...yeah." He didn't know what to say to her, Serena's words once again echoing through his mind.

Before he got the chance to get lost in his thoughts, Genesect moved, looking around to Mewtwo. "Can we go now?"

Mewtwo looked over at him and stepped towards him, her violet eyes searching his face. Ash faintly realized that she was smaller than the Mewtwo he was more familiar with, but that didn't stop her presence from being just as powerful. He was sure her eyes could see right into his thoughts.

"You're stronger than you think. You just have to remember that again." She turned towards the Genesect and nodded her head, flying up into the air. "Tornadus waits for you in the White Forest. He's holding off those that would try to cause problems with a storm, but the faster you go, the better."

"Thank you, and I know you can do it," Genesect whispered into his mind. "After all, you're not alone. It's not even just your friends. Most of the world is backing you up too." She flew up into the sky and waved at them before both Pokémon flew off.

"That's it?" Gary's voice broke through the silence. "They didn't even say anything."

"I get the feeling that they were talking to you this entire time, weren't they?" Clemont asked, focusing his attention on Ash.

That startled him a bit. He hadn't realized that the two Pokémon had been silent the entire time. It must have been really strange to watch. "They said to go to the White Forest. Tornadus is there protecting the area with a storm."

"That's where the fake Kyurem has been sighted most," Cilan noted thoughtfully. "It'll be cold,

especially if Tornadus is whipping up the wind everywhere!"

"Someone must be trying to attack for him to do that," Iris realized, her face pinching into a grimace. That made them all go silent.

"Is this even worth it?" May mumbled, her face turning red with embarrassment as everyone looked towards her.

"Huh?" Iris asked, startled. "Is what worth what?"

May shifted uncomfortably. "I just mean...all these problems...every one of them seems to be caused by people, not Pokémon." She hugged herself and looked down. "I guess I just wonder...I mean..."

"Are we really worth saving?" Ash spoke up, voicing the question he knew was on her mind. It was one that he had thought about a lot lately, only uttering the question to Pikachu.

Silence fell over the group, and any lightness that Ash felt was instantly gone, the heavy feeling back on his chest.

"Arceus started this, not people," Gary argued, surprising them by the genuine anger that was in his voice. "Yeah, humans might be the main driving factor in this catastrophe, but it only happened because Arceus fucked off for so long and abandoned the world. By the time he got back and sorted things out it was too late."

"People did that too," Misty spoke up, vividly remembering the cruelty shown to Arceus in the distant past that Dialga once sent them to.

"You think it really took that long for Arceus to heal?" Gary crossed his arms. "He was a baby and left and pouted over what the assholes in the past did. That is on them too but Arceus is supposed to be more than us."

"Does it really matter what caused this to start? Because it's pretty clear who's doing the most damage," Leaf pointed out. Gary glared at her.

"Not everything's black and white, right?" Cilan spoke up, wanting to defuse the argument before it got too bad. "I don't think you can lump all of humanity in the blame so yeah, there are people worth saving. However, spectrums also have extremes at either end and you know, those extremes probably are responsible. Some people might not deserve a second chance, but the majority does." He smiled a bit. "We just have to step up, to make sure people know what happened so they don't blame those who don't deserve it."

Everyone was silent as they thought about his words.

"That's deep, Cilan," Dawn said, a grin appearing on her face. Iris nodded, nudging him gently.

He rubbed the back of his head, his cheeks heating up. "Just trying to help." His blush swiftly vanished as he clapped his hands together. "I think we should move to one of the areas here that isn't all ruined and get some rest outside. It's nice here, and if it's as bad in the east as Mewtwo hinted, we'll need it." The tension was still high in the air. They were all stressed, and everyone was sick of being stuck in vehicles. Cilan knew they needed some time outdoors to clear their heads before trekking off into more danger.

It didn't take that long to find a place that looked unscathed, though the lack of Pokémon in the area did make it a little eerie. They stayed close enough to the water, unleashing their own

Pokémon who were far too cooped up these days. It was safer for them in general to stay inside, and it was more practical. When Pokémon were in their Pokéballs they didn't have to eat as much (though most trainers fed them regularly), but with so many Pokémon, they had to find some way to use their limited resources. The Pokémon all understood, but the trainers didn't like it.

Still, they all took the opportunity to stretch out, swim around, or fly in the sky. Cilan, Clemont, Dawn and Serena started working together to make food for the Pokémon first (at the insistence of everyone else), and then the rest of them. They all really needed it.

Ash put bowls down in front of Pikachu, Ria, Charizard, Sceptile, Garchomp and Greninja, frowning a bit at how little there was. It was definitely enough to sustain them, but he wished that they could all have more. He ran his fingers over Garchomp's rough scales and Greninja's smooth skin, guilt rushing through him. He had barely spent any time with his Pokémon as of late, normally keeping them tucked safely away, but he was so scared for them. He didn't want one of them to end up like Leaf's Beartic, whatever happened to her.

His eyes turned over to Leaf, who was glaring fiercely at the bowl of food that Serena just handed her to eat. She was trying desperately to keep a straight face as she stroked her Venusaur's leaves, but Ash could see her lip trembling. She took a deep breath and looked around, dusty-brown eyes landing on where her Espeon was eating with Gary's Umbreon, May's Glaceon and Serena's Sylveon, a sad smile appearing on her lips.

Ash looked around, tilting his head curiously when he observed May and Dawn standing together, Dawn talking wildly but quietly about something, pointing at the Pokémon. May looked unsure at whatever the young girl was saying, but a small smile slowly spread across her face.

Gary and Iris were helping Cilan, Clemont and Serena clean up the mess they made while cooking. It wouldn't have happened under normal circumstances, but this was far from that.

He looked towards the water as Greninja got up to go swim in it. Misty was sitting at the edge of the lake, using a rag to polish Starmie's jewel. He wanted to smile at how normal the sight was, her by the water with her Pokémon, but that unsettling feeling came back.

"I guess we should plan out where we're going next," Gary spoke up. "We'll need to find a place to get gas if we'll be driving all the way across Unova."

"The legendary Pokémon are just going to jerk us to where we need to go anyway, so I wouldn't worry too much about it," Leaf replied, a bitter sarcasm tinting her voice. "They won't let us stay here too long."

"I'm...inclined to agree, honestly," Clemont admitting before raising his hands towards Gary, who looked like he was about to go off on a bitter tirade. "I meant by the fact that they'll inevitably guide us somehow. Maybe you heard some people say that time seems to speed up as you reach the end of your life – or rather your perception of time does. The idea of time speeding up when an end is near. Well, whatever the end to this is, it feels really near to me and probably to them too."

Ash bowed his head slightly as nausea coursed through him. Clemont was probably right, he usually was. He wasn't sure if he made some sort of noise, but he could feel everyone's eyes on him.

A small, warm hand landed on his shoulder and he heard Misty's defensive voice snap, "Stop it."

Silence surrounded them all before the last person anyone expected broke it. "No." Serena spoke with such an unwavering sternness that it was startling.

"Excuse me?" Misty asked, her brow furrowing slightly as she stared at the other teenage girl.

For a brief moment, Serena looked like a Deerling in headlights before she squared her shoulders. "You heard me! Everyone's messed up in some way or another right now. I'm lucky, I know I am, because I'm one of the ones better off and Ash is the worst off but you can't keep doing this! We want to help and shielding him from us, Ash's friends, isn't doing him any good. Or you for that matter, Misty."

"Me?" Misty was suddenly on her feet, hands curling into fists. "I'm fine! I'm not being an assuming little bit—."

"But you are! How can we help each other if we're hiding from one another?"

"I'm inclined to agree with Serena," Cilan spoke up.

"Mind your own business!"

"Hey! He's just trying to help!" Iris growled fiercely, stepping in front of Cilan with her hands on her hips.

Ash blinked, not quite sure what was happening as they started arguing loudly. The Pokémon all stopped what they were doing, watching with interest, and for one wild moment, Ash could almost imagine them ordering their trainers to fight with different attacks.

"Does anyone even know what they're fighting about now?" Dawn asked, having approached Ash at some point of time. She tilted her head with an angry curiosity.

"I don't think so," May admitted, fiddling with her wrist where her bracelet once rested.

The longer the fighting went on – becoming more ridiculous by the moment – the angrier Dawn seemed to get. Ash watched her, more curious than anything else to see what she was going to do. Finally, the youngest of the group snapped, and he swore he saw volcanoes erupt behind her.

"That's enough!" Everyone instantly froze, staring at her as she raged, fire burning in her eyes.

"Everyone sit down and shut up! Don't you dare argue with me!" She glared at each person in turn until an idea hit her. "You know what, sit in a circle. Just do it!" Gary closed his mouth, his protest dying in his throat. With an amusing quickness, everyone quickly gathered in a circle, even the Pokémon that could be on land moving to circle the trainers, almost like they were afraid of the tiny adolescent with blue hair.

"Right," Dawn started once everyone was situated, plopping down beside Ash. "So we clearly have issues and it's been pretty obvious for a while and if we keep this up we'll end up killing each other so...I feel like I don't belong here. I saw horrible things but I can't remember – shock saved me from that and I'm glad. Doesn't change how I feel though. I haven't contributed anything to this since I came on board – not really." She looked around the group. "Someone go next."

"I don't understand. Just, voice a problem we have now?" Serena asked, glancing at the girl beside her curiously.

"No. Go with your big problem right now. Some people's will be worse but that's okay, there's no point comparing suffering," Dawn pointed out.

"I suppose maybe we should be open with one another," Serena hesitantly agreed. She thought for a moment before saying, "I feel useless here. Like I can't contribute anything. I'm the weakest battler here too. So I always feel like I'm dragging everyone down and I'm a waste of resources."

Clemont looked like he wanted to argue with this but Dawn quickly shook her head. Now wasn't the time for confrontation.

"My brothers might be dead," Cilan said, startling everyone. "I don't know where they are or what happened to them and there's nothing I can do about that. It rips me apart but there's nothing I can do about it right now and I know that."

Iris frowned sadly at his words before shaking her head. "What do I have to complain about? I don't have any family to worry about and my home is beyond safe." She'd like to see someone try to take over the Village of Dragons.

"Anything Iris. If it's weighing on your mind, tell us," Cilan insisted. "There's no need to compare suffering."

Iris thought for a moment, her shoulders slumping. "I'm not like you guys. I don't have this big thing that the bad guys did to me." She held out a Pokéball. "However, this Hydreigon does. His trainer abandoned him. She trained him for a long time, I knew her at the gym I was apprenticing at, and then just tossed him aside because Team Plasma asked. I saw it. He tried to follow and she got furious with him. The things she said were horrible." She ran a hand through her hair, cradling the Pokéball to her chest with the other. "Others tried to take him but he got nasty. I saved him and managed to catch him. He's been really hostile ever since. I just...I want to help but I'm not sure if I should just let him free. I got him away from the danger but I don't want to make it worse. Pokémon are hurting, and I want to stop it."

"That is something Iris, because you're right. This isn't just about people," Cilan agreed with her.

Everyone else was silent for a moment before Clemont spoke up. "Seems silly to mention after that, but I keep hearing the screaming in my head. The people who were killed in front of us while I tried to get the power off. I know it wasn't actually my fault, but it still hurts to think about." He looked down. "It makes me doubt that I'm actually useful at all."

"Of course you are," Gary said before anyone could stop him. "And me...well, like Iris, what do I have to complain about? The fact that I was useless on that island while my friends and innocent people suffered?" He moved his arm up so far, but couldn't seem to move it up any farther. "That my arm doesn't work like it used to after what happened on the train? That no matter how hard I try to keep us going we're falling apart?" He looked down and shook his head.

"If you call that nothing, than mine's superficial," Leaf said, almost like she was looking for a confrontation with him. "All my life I was told how much I look like my mother – how much I act like her – but she's a miserable human being and now I realize...when I pulled that trigger, I took someone's life. They're gone because of me. My Pokémon might be dead now and even if she's not she probably thinks I abandoned her. I'm a miserable person too." She closed her eyes.

May shifted uncomfortably, biting her lip before taking a deep breath. "Drew – my friend and someone I cared for a lot – died. It still feels like it was my fault because I let him slip, but I know it was his choice in the situation, but that doesn't make it any better. I was so furious with everything after that. I was willing to get my Pokémon to kill someone who may have been a bad person, but I didn't have any right to take their life – let alone force my Pokémon to. That's why I don't think I can do it. I don't think I can battle anymore. What if I lose it again?" She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them close.

Misty hesitated when eyes turned to her. She desperately wanted to snap that she was fine, but Cilan and Serena's eyes dug into her. How Serena knew that something was weighing on her, Misty didn't know, but she could understand Cilan's prying gaze. Still, she fixed her face in a

stubborn scowl until something shifted to her right. She glanced over at Ash, who stared at her with expectant eyes. Her gut squeezed painfully.

"My sisters are dead because Giovanni wanted to get back at me." She had no idea where the words came from but they needed to stop. Like her body was working against her, she kept going. "So maybe that makes me terrified to lose anyone else and I turn that into being super protective and that's just going to hurt more in the long run but I—." She didn't know how to finish her sentence, shaking his head and burying her face in her hands. Misty felt pathetic, especially when May of all people put a hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

"Admitting and confronting the problem is a start, for all of us," Cilan spoke up. His eyes slid beside the redhead. "Ash?"

Ash tore his eyes away from Misty and looked down at the ground. He didn't answer, shaking his head instead. The thoughts of his friends in so much emotional pain because of this journey tore him apart. They shouldn't have even been here.

"Come on, everyone else shared," Gary pointed out without any of the normal bite in his voice.

Misty pulled her face from her hands, wiping the tears off of her palms. She hesitated, before deciding that in this scenario some comfort wouldn't be a bad thing. She reached out and squeezed his knee. On Ash's other side, Dawn put a hand on his shoulder.

Ash still didn't say anything, until a small voice whispered, "Pikapi." Ash twisted around, inadvertently shrugging off the two girls trying to comfort him. He stared at Pikachu's sad eyes before looking up, first at Ria, then at Sceptile, then Garchomp, then Greninja, until he finally rested his eyes on Charizard. They all stared at him with the same intense worry, silently pleading with him to speak. He could feel it through the bonds that he had with all of them because of his Aura. It was especially intense from Pikachu and Ria.

Still staring at his Pokémon instead of his friends, Ash said, "Arceus said that what made me the Chosen One, more than anything else, was my choices. He lied though, didn't he? If I had a choice none of you would be here. It wouldn't be like this. There are no more choices left." His shoulders slumped as he tried to piece together the fragments of raging thoughts plaguing his mind.

"No, that wasn't your choice, it was ours," Dawn insisted, breaking her own rule of just listening. "You need us here with you. I don't think—."

"I died before, you know." That instantly made her fall silent. "Well, more than once." He looked at Pikachu, who flinched, having been witness to most of those scenarios. "That's how I know I'd be okay on my own. I'd just die and they'd keep bringing me back until I finish what they want me to do." Ash shook his head. "Ever since we saw Victini and then got here I've been having dreams about when I saved it. The building we were in was pushed into the sky. I couldn't...breathe and it was so hard to think and move. It was cold and it burned. It was terrible. Until it wasn't. Everything just went numb and I fell asleep. It wasn't bad. It was better than what came before. That's what it feels like now. It's cold and burning and hard to breathe and I can't help anyone or do anything to stop it. The numbness would be better. It's nothing to be scared of." He shifted, pulling his legs up to his chest. "Especially if they just bring me back anyway."

It was like the air had been sucked out of the area around them. Pikachu cringed and inched closer to his trainer, sitting on his feet. "Pikapi." His other Pokémon exchanged worried expressions.

Behind him, his friends stared in varying degrees of horror. Misty wanted to reach out, to pull him into a hug so strong that it would threaten to break his bones. She actually started to reach out, but

another fiery creature beat her to the punch.

Charizard stood up, a blaze nearly matching his tail-flame in his eyes. Ash let out a startled yelp when the Pokémon picked him up as if he weighed nothing and walked a little bit away from everyone else. He laid back down, plopping Ash beside him. When the boy tried to move, Charizard simply tugged him back, his tail curling around them so the flames were close to keep him warm.

Everyone else watched as Pikachu curled up at Ash's side, and the other Pokémon moved in, none of them caring if they overlapped with one another as long as they were protecting and supporting their trainers. Ash didn't bother struggling, giving in to his Pokémon's silent demands.

Everyone was silent for a moment before Misty gasped quietly. "I didn't know. I didn't know it was this bad. Oh Mew...is this..." She took a deep breath and realized that there would be no point in blaming herself. She may have been shielding Ash from the others getting too close out of fear, but Ash himself kept any of his inner thoughts to himself.

"We won't leave him alone, we can't," Gary said, his voice shaky. Ash's words sounded far too suicidal for Gary's liking, or apathetic to his own survival at the very least.

"But this is Ash. He wouldn't..." Serena trailed off, not even wanting to think it.

They all looked at the pile of Pokémon. Leaf sighed, and shook her head. "We're all becoming things we're not. We just don't leave him alone. Be there."

"Work out all our problems together, because when we win, we'll still be here," May spoke up. She looked towards Dawn. "Earlier before the fight started, you said you'd do practice battles with me. For contests. Did you mean that?"

"Of course!" Dawn smiled brilliantly at her. If she could help her friends, even just one of them, it would make this worthwhile for her. Her eyes moved towards where Ash was, her smile falling a bit.

She just hoped that she could help heal all of her friends once this was over, especially since she had the distinct feeling that it would be over sooner rather than later.

Ash didn't hear the concerns of any of his human friends. Instead, he looked around at the Pokémon that were shielding him. Playful Garchomp who laid a little bit away, keeping an eye on everything around him while still resting. Serious Greninja who stayed away from Charizard's tail, both so he wouldn't dry out and so he wouldn't accidentally get the flames wet. Aloof Sceptile, who was still trying to act like he wasn't all that worried while also remaining close to his trainer. Intelligent Ria, who appeared to be asleep but was keeping her Aura focused on him. Proudful Charizard, who refused to let him get too far away, offering him protection and the warmth that radiated from his body. Loyal Pikachu, his absolute best friend beyond any other, staring up at him with worried eyes as he cuddled close.

Ash hugged Pikachu closer to him as he closed his eyes, letting a tear fall. His body, his mental and emotional state, didn't want him to keep going. That dark voice in his mind was telling him to run away, to hide away from all the pain. For the first time in a while though, another voice rang louder, telling him to keep fighting. To try and get better. If he couldn't do it for the world, or even for Misty who was hurting in ways he didn't see in his selfishness, then he would do it for the Pokémon surrounding him that had limitless faith in him. He would do it for the Pokémon that were safely tucked away in the emergency storage system too.

He would try for them.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time!

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

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Clashing Ideals

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

There was something about inhaling chilled air. It burned his throat, vocal chords, and even his lungs, but it was so much clearer and refreshing than warm, muggy air. He was shivering as his breath swirled in front of him in erratic puffs that he was trying to control, but somehow the sting of the cold didn't actually register in his brain.

His hand was shaking, clutched tightly around a periwinkle orb with a light merrily dancing in the center. It slipped a bit before he tightened his grip, smearing the blood on his hands over the glass surface.

His brown eyes scanned the area in front of him as his back pressed against the cool stone of the shrine behind him. His vision only went so far until it hit swirling walls of wind and snow – the storm that he was in the eye of. Beyond the howl of the wind, he could hear the yells of people and Pokémon he couldn't see.

'Move,' a voice screamed in his mind over and over again. A voice that sounded startlingly like his from when he was much younger. *'You need to help them. Move!'*

"I can't," his mumbled words fell against his chapped lips. "I can't."

Perhaps he should have listened to that voice in his head. A shower of sharp icicles shot from within the storm, sailing towards him at an alarming speed. Ash flinched backwards, but had nowhere else to go. A powerful blast of air gusted down from the sky, slamming the ice into the ground before it could touch him.

Heart beating madly, Ash looked up at Tornadus, who had shifted into a bird-like form. The Pokémon glanced down at him and then descended, landing on the top of the shrine and staring out at the storm.

Ash slumped, his back sliding down the shrine until he was sitting in the snow, shielded by his blue snow-pants. He closed his eyes, clutching the orb to his chest.

How had it gotten to this point?

...

Despite the cold wind outside, Dawn felt completely comfortable – almost toasty – in the SUV. She was settled peacefully between Serena and Leaf, much more at ease than her last trip with the latter and May. She loved her brunette friends, but together, both of them could be a bit disheartening at the moment. Then again, everyone seemed a little bit better once she made them actually get their thoughts out.

Her dark blue eyes opened and she focused on the passenger seat in the front. Ash was sitting wide-awake, surprisingly enough. Once they shuffled cars a bit, Dawn realized that Ash had a tendency to sleep more often than not. It worried her greatly, since it was just another obvious sign of depression, as if there weren't enough of those already. Perhaps that was why it was agreed that she and Serena would be two of the ones in whatever vehicle he was. Both of them could keep optimistic smiles on their faces easier than others could.

Instead of sleeping, Ash was digging through his bag – the inside bright with multicolour lights every time he opened it. One by one, he lifted out the glass orbs, running his hand across them before setting them back inside.

She tilted her head to the side. "What are you doing?"

Ash glanced back at her and mirrored her gesture, confused for a moment. Pikachu nudged him and pointed at the orbs. "Oh. I just...they said that these would disappear if I don't touch them in a day. Well, maybe I just need to be near them, I don't know." He shifted back around and picked up the dark pink one. "Rather not risk it." They all knew there would be no way to get them back before whatever Giovanni was planning came to fruition.

"Can I see one?"

He shrugged and held the pink orb out to her. She gingerly took it into her hands, blinking with surprise as the light instantly died once Ash let go of it. "Hey."

"They react to Ash," Leaf explained, watching from where she was leaning against the chilled glass of the window. "His Aura."

Dawn nodded her head and handed the orb back to Ash, watching as the light sprang back to life. He quickly put it in his bag and closed it tightly, dropping it to the floor and allowing Pikachu to take a more comfortable position on his lap.

The blue-haired girl suddenly felt the urge to keep her friend talking. "How do they feel? The orbs?" He tried to explain Aura to her before, and it was both fascinating and confusing.

Ash was silent, and in the driver's seat, Cilan glanced at him with worry before turning his eyes back to the road.

"It's like...feeling raw power but they're a bit different from one another. I can't explain it really. All together they're...overwhelming." Ash shook his head. "Makes focusing on Aura hard since they're all I can feel."

That certainly sounded stressful. Dawn bit her lip and thought for a moment. "What if we kept them away from you?" Serena and Leaf looked at her with interest and Ash turned in his seat, once again tilting his head in the curious way they shared. "You have to touch them once a day, but we could always try to – I don't know – hide them."

She nearly dropped when she saw his lips turn up slightly. It was very small, and very brief, but it was genuine. He shook his head a bit but didn't say anything, turning to lean back against the window again.

"It's starting to snow," Serena noted, though she didn't have to since they could all see. On a personal level, she couldn't wait until they were done with Unova since she was sick of the cold. Sinnoh had been terrible for it, and Unova was even worse. She didn't complain though since the weather was the least of their problems.

"That's not good," Cilan said as he leaned forward, squinting a bit. "The road's slippery enough as it is."

"We're getting pretty close to the White Forest though, aren't we?" Leaf asked, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her thighs, her hands propping up her chin. "This might be a good thing if we're getting closer to Tornadus."

"Mewtwo did say he was whipping up a storm, right Ash?" Serena added, receiving a nod in response.

"It could also mean we're getting close to the Mirage Kyurem," Ash muttered under his breath. It had been a while since they came face to face with a Mirage Pokémon, which was good for them, but a bit unsettling. They weren't lying low, and it just meant that they were causing problems in other places.

"I don't think—." Serena's response was cut off as the trees not far from them exploded. Cilan jerked the steering wheel to avoid anything falling from the sky. "What was that?"

"Maybe Ash was right," Leaf said grimly, and everyone else saw what she meant a moment later as they got around a curve in the road. Trainers battled each other viciously, not caring about where their attacks landed. Both groups of people had similar insignias, but one was dressed like old knights while the others reminded her more of pirates.

"Those are the two factions of Team Plasma!" Cilan was unable to hide the alarm in his voice as he started to drive faster. The reason for this was obvious a moment later as they narrowly escaped a rogue Fire Blast.

Dawn jerked around in her seat to look out the rear-view window when she heard the other car screech. She watched as it moved out of the way thanks to Gary's quick driving. "We need to get out of here before someone gets hit!"

Cilan nodded his head and mentally urged the car forward faster. Attacks and shockwaves continued to blast at them, forcing him to jerk the vehicle back and forth. "This is really b-AD!" His voice rose as he tried to go around a turn but the wheels slid on the black ice that littered the ground. He tried to drive into the swerve, and was able to stop the car from tipping, but now they were going down a hill that definitely wasn't meant for cars. He slammed on the breaks and they skidded until they came to a stop. Luckily, there was another road a few feet away.

Leaf turned around to look at the SUV behind them and sighed in relief. "They managed to stop at the top. We should—." This time, an explosion between the two vehicles cut her off. Gary backed the other SUV up and turned towards the road above, while Cilan pushed the acceleration to the floor and they sped towards the road in front of them.

"This isn't the same road," Dawn realized as she twisted around. There was no way that other road could connect to this one. "We're going in different directions!"

"We have no choice!" Cilan called back. "We can't go back through the fighting."

"But—."

"Everyone knows where we're going," Leaf interrupted. "The best thing we can do is to just keep going forward." She made a funny face at her own words. "Don't look back."

"We met up again in Johto," Serena spoke up. "We were separated with no idea where the others were but a destination in mind and we met up again. We'll do it again."

This visibly upset Dawn, but Leaf nodded her head. "She's right." She paused. "We stole a car then too."

Pikachu snorted from the front seat as he calmed the rapid beating of his tiny heart.

"Ash?" Cilan said cautiously as he slowed down. "What do you want to do?"

Ash almost crumbled down into his seat as he felt everyone's eyes on him. His face reddened and he shrugged his shoulders. Through the side-view mirror, he could see Leaf watching him, still waiting for a real answer.

"Go back or go forward, those are our options right now."

He didn't want to choose, but a voice inside of him, a young voice that he had only heard in videos before, screamed at him. It screamed and kicked and Ash knew what he wanted.

"Forward."

A smile appeared on Cilan's lips and he nodded, speeding up a bit but still being wary of the icy road.

Around them, the winds picked up as the storm started to rage stronger.

...

Footsteps echoed through the air as a young girl with long, golden-blond hair ran through the forest. The leaves crushed under her boots as she stumbled, and fell to the ground with a grunt of pain.

"Pipika!"

"I'm okay," she said, spitting out the dirt that she actually ingested. The Pikachu stared at her dryly. She pushed herself up and was about to insist to the little Pokémon that she was alright when she heard another noise. The girl and the Pokémon exchanged looks before slowly creeping forward.

A gasp escaped her lips and she stood up. Throwing caution to wind, she dashed around the corner of the rocks, her hair flying behind her. Her bright brown eyes stayed locked on the tall figure standing closer to the cliff side.

"Red!" He didn't move at her yell, causing a bit of frustration to well up within her. She gritted her teeth as she stormed forward, throwing all caution to wind as she grabbed his arm. "Red?"

He moved quickly, shoving her back. She cried out in surprise as she hit the ground and stared up at the older boy with wide eyes. He turned to face her, and she was taken aback by just how blank his crimson eyes were. Something wasn't right.

"Red?" She slowly pushed herself up. "You don't know me, but my name's Yellow. I came to find you."

He glared at her fiercely. "I don't need a little girl's help. I know what I'm doing."

"Everyone's worried about you though. Professor Oak. Blue. Even Green. And your mom too." She stood up entirely when she saw his face falter a bit at the mention of his mother. She had met the kind, black-haired woman before, and it broke her heart to think about how much she worried for her son. Yellow couldn't imagine having to live like that.

"I'm fine."

"Are the rumours true?" She stood up. "They say you did horrible things, and maybe you don't remember me, but I remember admiring you, and what they say doesn't make sense." Yellow reached a hand out. "They said that you're hurting people and the Red I heard about wouldn't have done that."

"I'm not hurting anyone!" Red snapped, his eyes staring at her almost viciously. "I'm not. But she was right. Madam Boss from Team Rocket, she was right about everything. The corrupt Masters, all of it."

"So fix it, but not this way!"

"Don't talk about things you don't understand, little girl!" He held a Pokéball out. "I don't need help from someone like you."

Yellow tensed, though she stayed in her place and refused to back down, even when he threw the Pokéball and it unleashed a ferocious Charizard. She could feel the heat from the Pokémon, and her expression wavered a bit.

"Pipika!" Pikachu ran forward, standing between Yellow and the Charizard, his cheeks sparking dangerously.

Red blinked, genuine surprise crossing his features. "Pikachu?"

There was a flash of light from a Pokéball at Yellow's belt, and a second Pikachu appeared, this one with a heart-shaped tail. She joined the first Pikachu, both glaring at the Charizard.

Yellow looked from one Pokémon to the next, and then to Red. She bit her lip not wanting a fight to break out, not this way. She didn't want to force Pikachu to fight the trainer that they had been searching for. His trainer.

Her brown eyes scanned the area around them until they fell on a rock. Just as Red was getting ready to tell Charizard to fight, Yellow picked up the rock and slammed it into his head, and he crumbled to the ground at her feet.

...

Delia's eyes snapped open, and she stared around her with confusion. She wasn't back on some rocky terrain close to a cliff's edge. Instead, she was in a tiny room that she stared with Grace Paschall, Bonnie Liscio and that nice girl that came with Brock's family, Lucy Morinelli.

She sat up slowly, her stomach pulling a bit from the injury that was still healing. She carefully slipped out of the bed, padding across the cold floor and walking out into the hall, intent on going to the kitchen to fetch a drink. She noticed the light of the television, and it didn't surprise her all

that much. Someone was always up late at night here. What did surprise her was that it was Brock sitting there.

A wave of maternal worry rushed through Delia. She approached him slowly, putting her hand on his shoulder. Brock started, looking at her with surprise before he relaxed. "What are you doing up so late, Mrs. Ketchum?" That was how Delia knew how tired he really was. He was fairly used to using her first name now.

"Dreams," she admitted. There was no shame in saying what was bothering her. As much as her instincts begged her to shield Brock from any sort of hurt just as she would her own son, she wasn't going to. Brock was an adult now, and there was no point in hiding things from him.

He motioned towards the couch, silently inviting her to sit with him. Delia took his invitation, sinking down to the cushion and staring at the television. There was a broadcast coming from Sinnoh, detailing the success that the Pokémon League was having against Team Galactic. Now that news came in from everywhere more regularly, the entire picture was starting to piece together.

Brock sighed and said, "It's all screwed up." He motioned to the TV, on the same wave-length as her. "I've faced some of these guys before and it never turned out like this. I can't remember a time when something like this happened before."

Delia hummed in acknowledgement as she leaned back into the seat. "It...wasn't to this scale, but years ago, something like this could have happened to Kanto." That caught his attention, and he turned to face her. "Team Rocket, under the control of Madam Boss at the time, was secretly gaining ground in the shadows. That was her style. She wanted people in positions of power that she could control. Giovanni has some of that too, this wouldn't have happened if he didn't, but it's not the same. She was much more subtle about it. Most people didn't even believe it was a problem."

"I...heard something about that before. Red brought her down, right?"

"Red, Blue, Green and I were the ones that defeated her together." Delia smiled bitterly, a look that didn't suit her normally happy appearance. "We thought we did a good job, that those who were left wouldn't be a threat. We were so very wrong. Not long after, people started dying." She looked down. "My sweet Pokémon died trying to protect me when I was targeted. That was why I ran. I couldn't let that sacrifice be for nothing. I went back to my birth name – records were very iffy after the war – and permanently change my hair colour. I couldn't train anymore – not until Mimey came into my life."

"I—I didn't know."

"You were never supposed to. Ash doesn't even know." She shook her head. "Then Misty was killed to get back at Red. He was a Champion; he wasn't easy to get at. It broke him, you know. He became almost manic about becoming the Pokémon Master so he'd have more power to clear out the corruption in the league. It wasn't just her life that was taken though. Green had done many questionable things – always willing to do what no one else would – to stop Madam Boss. It was all forced into the spotlight afterwards. It ruined her, and not even Leaf could bring her back entirely." She sighed. "Things seemed to settle and we all tried to move on with our lives, never knowing that some were still in danger. When Gary was seven, Leaf's father killed his parents and aunt. That man had been in and out of our lives for seven years before striking. Green dispatched him. Red completely isolated himself and everything seemed to go quiet."

"Mew," Brock whispered. He wasn't sure why Delia was telling him all this now, but a part of him

wanted to know more about it. He didn't want to actually ask her though, the memories definitely weren't pleasant ones. "At least it ended."

"That's the thing, I don't think it ever did. I think the end of that was the start of Giovanni's conquest. This was probably just his endgame established years ago. He took out the ones who threatened him most – even getting Red in the end." She looked at the television again and motioned towards it. "We brought this fight on because we couldn't finish it ourselves. And Lance has the audacity to think that he can save the world. It won't be him."

"That's why you let Ash go."

Delia smiled bitterly. "He was born premature, you know. He was so small, but had a surprisingly good set of lungs on him. Still, from that moment on I knew he was special. All parents say that – maybe you even thought it about your siblings – but I knew. That was why I knew he had to go when he said Arceus wanted him to. I knew." She glanced at him. "You're the young ones now, Brock. It won't be us to end this war. It'll be you."

Brock looked at the television, his gut twisting uncomfortably. He knew she was right. He knew that no matter how many battles were fought or how much tactical advance one group seemed to get over the other, in the end it would come down to what Arceus wanted.

He got the feeling that end was closer than anyone realized.

...

Misty pulled her jacket tight around herself. At some point in time, probably during their escape from the warring Team Plasma factions, something broke and they no longer had any form of heat.

Iris, who had been in the front originally, swapped seats with Clemont. Now she was squished between Misty and May, the three teenagers using one another for warmth.

"We need to ditch this SUV," Clemont spoke up from the front, rubbing his hands together. "Too much damage and we've had it for too long. I'm amazed we didn't get pulled over yet."

"It's the end of the world," Gary quipped sarcastically. "No one cares about a couple of shitty, stolen cars." He squinted out the window, his breath rising above him. "I think there's mountains in the distance." He sounded less than pleased about this.

"It's not mountains," Iris replied, her teeth chattering. "From the direction we've been going since we got split up, I think it's Black City."

"Do you know if it's safe?" May asked, scooting a little closer to Iris as she shivered.

"Team Plasma wasn't there the last I heard but who knows by now?" Iris answered. It was a good point, since things changed everywhere so quickly it was hard to go on information from even the day before.

"We can still get supplies there," Misty pointed out. "Hopefully the others will think the same." She was worried about Ash and everyone else, but they all agreed to keep moving forward, choosing to believe that their friends were okay. It didn't stop her mind from straying to darker places though.

Silence fell over the car as they steadily approached what was revealed to be a looming city.

"Oh wow," May breathed out as they finally saw it in detail, even as flurries started drifting from the sky. They had all seen big cities before, but Black City was something else all together. It was

made of what looked like hundreds of tall buildings made from the same dark metals and reflective windows, all leading to one absolutely massive skyscraper. May wasn't sure whether to be intimidated or impressed.

Once they actually got into the city, the awe gave way to something else, a slight sense of panic. It was alright at first, but a couple minutes in, they turned onto a street and almost immediately were blocked into heavy traffic that was just barely inching forward. Normally, it wouldn't be a big deal, but they were in a stolen vehicle that certainly looked like it had seen better days and could easily draw attention.

"We need to ditch this car," Gary said, his green eyes darting back and forth. "There's too much..." He trailed off as people started running in the opposite direction that they were facing. "What the hell?"

He got his answer a moment later as a wave of blue light slammed into several cars, instantly freezing them. He jerked back in his seat and heard alarmed cries from everyone else around him.

A moment later, a large, grey creature with what looked like wings made out of ice flew above them. Iris gasped and said, "Kyurem!"

May pressed her forehead against the window, watching as it attacked a group of people, who hastily ran away. "What's it doing?"

Misty threw open her door, startling them. She all but threw herself out of it and ran to the back where their bags were. "We need to get out of here. We're sitting ducks in this traffic!"

"Maybe it won't hurt us?" May suggested warily, not believing that at all after what she had just seen.

"I bet it's a Mirage Pokémon," Misty scowled as she started tossing bags at their owners.

"Let's not stick around to find out." Gary reached out and grabbed May's arm, urging the younger girl forward. Everyone else followed suit, running away from the chaos. It wasn't easy, they were stuck in a congestion of cars and panicked people.

It took Clemont only a minute to realize their mistake of sticking with the crowd. Crowds were much easier to attack than individuals. "We need to get off the street!"

"There!" May yelled, startling Gary by dragging him this time. She shoved her way through the crowd of people, heading towards one of the side streets. They didn't get far before the ground beneath their feet started to freeze.

Iris screamed as she flailed and slipped, slamming into Misty, who careened into Clemont, and then the three of them knocked over Gary and May. The group slid down the sidewalk before crashing into a building.

Iris tilted her head back in time to see Kyurem appear around the corner. A nasty voice in the back of her mind wondered if what Ash said was true, that it was just like going to sleep. She didn't want to freeze to death but if it was over quickly that was better than other means.

Another beam of light shot over their heads, slamming into Kyurem and throwing him backwards. Before Iris could even process what had happened, someone was trying to pull her to her feet while yelling at her.

"Get up! Hurry!"

Iris looked around, blinking in surprise when she came face to face with glaring turquoise eyes. "Georgia?"

"Are you stupid? Move!" She shoved Iris forward, her Beartic creating a wall of ice behind them. "What are you staring at? Move it!"

"Iris!" Misty called out to her, grabbing her arm to drag her alone.

Iris was still stunned by this turn of events and barely realized that they were running inside a building and down a set of stairs. It was only when a second (or was it third) set of doors closed behind her that she realized they weren't outside anymore.

She blinked and took in their surroundings. They were inside of a large building, probably in the basement judging from the lack of windows. Like many buildings in Black City, the inside was made from black tiles and reflective surfaces, giving it a dark, eerie feeling. Though Cilan probably would have called it modern.

There were people milling all over the place, many of them hunkering down in corners and staring at the ceiling with something akin to fear. Others were yelling and monitoring things, but everything was a blur to Iris.

The one thing that did stick out in their mind was who had saved them. She turned around and looked at the pink-haired girl. "What are you doing here?"

Georgia jutted out her hip, putting a hand on it as she raised an eyebrow. "Saving your dumb ass. This," she twirled her finger in the air, "is the resistance."

"Resistance?" Iris repeated, blinking as she looked around.

"We've been sneaking around all over Unova, I've never heard of any resistance," Gary noted, sounding a bit skeptical.

Georgia eyed him for a moment before shrugging. "Not my problem. I mean, if you have two working eyes – or just one – you can clearly see it exists."

"She's not wrong," Misty agreed, looking around with interest. She was about to say something else, but Georgia turned her attention her way.

"I know you! You're the girl Ketchum claimed was his girlfriend!"

Clemont tried to hide his smile, Gary chuckled, a genuine smile spread across Iris' face, and May snorted with amusement. Misty sighed, shoulders slumping. "Why does everyone think he lied?"

"You know why."

"Okay maybe he's a bit of a goober at times but..." Misty trailed off and shrugged. She didn't say 'or he used to be' but it was on her mind and she was sure that it occurred to everyone else too. "Not the point. I thought the Champion here wasn't doing much?"

"Alder? No. His grandson, Benga, is in charge here," a male voice answered instead.

Iris looked around, blinking at who she saw. "Trip? You're here too?" His stare told her just how stupid a question it really was. "Right, that's obvious."

"Do you know what's happening?" Clemont asked. He pointed towards the ceiling and added,

"With the Mirage Kyurem."

"Mirage?"

"It's not the real Kyurem, but don't look relieved, it's even more powerful," Gary explained, crossing his arms in front of him.

"We know that. Benga heard it from Alder who heard it from another Champion. Just didn't know they were called Mirage Pokémon." Trip shrugged.

"And that mess I saved you from luckily has nothing to do with us." Georgia looked far too smug for Iris' liking. "That was Team Plasma A trying to take out Team Plasma B."

"We ran into them fighting on the roads here," Misty said, looking down in thought. "We were trying to get to the White Forest and got separated from some of our friends in another car."

"Cilan and Ash are with them," Iris added.

"White Forest, huh? Hope they have good winter tires and coats. It's a mess there, and that's coming from someone who likes the snow and cold."

The group exchanged worried glances with one another. If the SUV they abandoned was a mess, yet they managed to actually stay on the road, all of them were a bit worried to think about what condition the other one would be in by now.

May hugged herself, doubt rushing through her mind. She closed her eyes and for a brief moment saw a hand slipping through her own, pulling her bracelet with it. Her eyes snapped open as she forced the memory and the feelings down with difficulty. "They'll be okay. They have to be."

"Is there any way to get to the White Forest from here?" Clemont wondered.

"Right now? No," Trip answered. "Plasma can't even get through there and they've been trying. Probably because of the legendary Pokémon said to be there lately."

"Hey! Don't let them freeze over there!" A young man with wild red and orange hair called out as he hurried by. "Bring them in farther! Get them blankets or towels!"

"That was Benga, wasn't it?" Iris asked, leaning around Georgia to peer at him. "He looks so much like Alder."

Trip nodded and Georgia sighed. "Guess we're playing babysitter, come on." She turned and started walking without waiting for anyone.

Iris started to follow her when something occurred to her. "Hey, where's Burgundy? You two were together the last I saw you."

Georgia's step faltered just slightly before she snapped, "Somewhere else." She kept walking.

Iris felt nausea rise up in her. First Cilan's brothers, and now Burgundy? She wondered about everyone else that she knew, and sent a mental prayer for anything listening that they would be okay.

They had to be.

...

"Well, we're screwed."

Leaf's words made everyone else slump down in their seats. From a lack of gas, or from the damage (most likely both), there was no way that they would be getting the vehicle started again.

"What do we do?" Dawn asked, her blue eyes glancing out the window in worry. It was already starting to snow a bit, and from the looks of it, it was going to get worse.

"We can't stay in here," Cilan reasoned. "We'll freeze."

"We'll freeze out there too," Serena pointed out, rubbing her hands together.

Ash, who had been staring out the window, glanced down as Pikachu shifted in his arms. The Pokémon pointed at himself and said, "Pikapika cha pikapikapipika."

"What did he say?" Leaf asked him.

Ash tilted his head in thought before nodding. "Snow's a good insulator."

"Do you even know what that means?" The sarcastic response slipped out of Leaf's mouth before she could stop.

Ash shifted and looked at her, a bit of annoyance crossing his features (which was surprise in and of itself, since he seemed to either run on depression or apathy as of late). "I did travel a lot."

"Okay," Cilan interrupted before anyone could start arguing. "Ash is right. Instead of freezing here, we can build some sort of fort in the snow with the help of our Pokémon. Is that okay with everyone?"

Serena, Dawn and Leaf all exchanged quick glances before the blonde nodded. "It has to be warmer than here."

"Right," Cilan agreed, clapping his gloved hands together before he adjusted his green scarf. "We should get moving now. Leave this behind in case someone notices it." He nodded towards the SUV.

It took a moment for anyone to willingly get out of the car. Even Pikachu, with his warm fur, was eyeing the snow warily.

Cilan was the first to brave the storm, pulling his black jacket around him as he moved towards the back of the SUV. Soon, everyone else was piling out to get their bags.

Pikachu shivered from his spot on Ash's shoulder. He reached up and brushed his hand against the Pokémon's ear.

"Does anyone have a compass?" Cilan asked. "It'll be really easy to get turned around in this, but I know we need to keep going East from here so if we have one it'll help."

Leaf nodded her head, the wind whipping her long hair into her face. "Yeah, but let's find some shelter first and work from there." Dawn and Serena both voiced their agreement to this proposition.

The only goal was to put some distance between themselves and the vehicle so no one would find them. The wind and the snow would cover their tracks, so there was no reason to worry about being followed.

"Ash," Serena said between chattering teeth. "I know dragons don't like the cold, but do you think Garchomp could dig one for us? Might be warmer than just the snow."

Ash nodded his head, but kept his eyes forward. It was so cold, and so hard to see beyond the glowing spheres that they had with them, but he still knew that they were a lot closer than any of them originally thought. Maybe it just called out to him more before he had them, he still wasn't sure. He kept that information to himself though.

His mind wandered back to the fact that he purposely left one behind – ignored it when it called out to him. He thought about Virizion who would protect the shrine instead of hiding to save herself, and felt sick. His eyes flickered to Cilan, and he had to bite his lip to keep from blurting out his idiotic decision. Ash was well aware that he had to tell someone, but at the same time, he didn't want to. It was terribly confusing.

None of them were sure how long they walked through the blizzard, staying close together both for warmth and so they wouldn't get separated from one another by the poor visibility. It was only when they started losing feeling in their fingers and toes that they all agreed they needed to get out of the storm.

Garchomp glared at Ash as he let him out of his Pokéball, clearly unimpressed with the weather.

"Sorry," he called out to his Pokémon so he could hear him over the wind. "Just dig a tunnel we can stay in, we'll be okay." Garchomp grumbled at that, but went to work digging through the layers of snow and ice. It was clear that he was using his hatred for the frozen water as motivation to work quickly.

"We should cover it up with snow," Leaf spoke up once they moved inside and dropped their bags to the dirt floor. She motioned towards the entrance. "That way it keeps the wind out."

"We need small holes for air though," Cilan replied, though he certainly agreed with her. They worked on piling up the snow to block the entrance, fingers numb by the end of it.

Luckily, by the time the two of them finished, Ash, Serena and Dawn managed to get a small fire going. They didn't need a huge one, just enough to warm them up.

Cilan looked around from one person to the next. They were all pressed close together, surrounding the fire. He frowned before snapping his fingers. "I got it! I'll whip up some soup to keep us warm! We need something to eat anyway!"

"I can help," Serena volunteered. "Normally I bake while Clemont cooks, but I can do whatever you need me to."

He smiled at her warmly and nodded his head, reaching into his bag while looking for a pot. "The rest of you just sit back and keep that fire going. We'll have food soon!" There were murmurs of agreement from them. Satisfied, Cilan set out to work.

Serena was more than a bit amused as the young man started piling different foods and spices from his bag. Briefly, she wondered how people ever lived without bags that could shrink items in them, but decided not to focus on that when something else caught her eye. "You have vegetables?"

"Of course! I always keep something in my little cold-storage bags!"

"Of course you do." Serena shook her head. She shouldn't have been surprised. Though it was only a brief meeting in Kalos, she already knew Cilan well enough from back then to know that he was as prepared as he was eccentric. "Want me to start chopping them?"

"Please," he answered, passing her a knife and a cutting board because of course he had those with him too.

She got to work, looking over her shoulder at the others every once in a while. Their little cave was doing its job to the point where they were shedding their winter coats, comfortable with the fire and the heat from one another. Ash, Dawn, and Pikachu all nodded off at one point, while Leaf was looking through a journal of sorts.

"You're really good at this, aren't you?" Serena spoke up, not liking the silence. Cilan hummed curiously, and she clarified herself. "Survival in this type of weather."

"Oh, no," he laughed. "That's mostly what I learned from Iris. I mean, I knew a little bit, but nothing like she knows. My brothers and I were never..." he trailed off, his hands hesitating before he continued cutting up some sort of meat that he had into tiny pieces, tossing them into the pot. "I learned a lot from Iris."

"They're okay, I'm sure of it," Serena said with such conviction that it made Cilan look up. "Your brothers. I don't know about Plasma that much, but I know from the others that they probably would have left your brothers there to find if they were gone. I'm sure they got away."

Cilan looked down before smiling at looking up at her. "I want to keep thinking that way. It's hard sometimes."

"Then I'll do it for you too, especially when you feel like you can't."

"You're something else, aren't you? You've been with Ash on this journey from the beginning, right? You haven't let it bring you down." He frowned and lowered his voice. "Ash has. Misty has. Almost everyone has. But not you."

This time Serena hesitated before shaking her head. "That's not true."

"Of course it is," Leaf spoke up. Serena and Cilan both glanced at her. She smiled at them and said, "I'll admit, when we first met, I thought you were a bit...sad. It was pretty obvious you liked Ash. Really obvious. I just—I guess I saw you as that tag-along person that didn't really belong. The weak one we had to keep an eye on. You and Clemont both, but at least he had his intelligence." She shook her head. "I was wrong."

"No, you were right. I'm not a good battler, I'm not very good with strategy or anything or—."

"Emotional strength is just as valid as physical and mental strength, and you have that in heaps. Clemont mentioned that to me too. I think he would have fallen to pieces without you." Leaf laughed. "You and Dawn, you have no idea how much you two being here means."

Serena didn't want to smile, but she still did. For the longest time, she had wondered what Leaf thought about her presence there, the older girl was pretty intense most of the time, so hearing that from her was more than a bit reassuring.

She smiled a bit, picking up the vegetables she was cutting and passing them to Cilan. "Thank you, Leaf, for saving Clemont. I don't think I would have been able to face Bonnie again if he had died."

"You don't need to thank me for that. He saved me too."

It didn't take long to boil the soup over the fire, the smell of it rousing both Dawn and Ash.

Cilan watched his dark-haired friends, taking comfort in how Dawn was able to eat a hearty

helping, but Ash still picked at his. He set it down before he was even finished with a sigh and went to his pack, hauling out his sleeping bag.

Biting his lip, Cilan glanced at the entrance of the cave, a sudden idea coming to him. It wasn't a good idea, it was a horrible one that he wished wouldn't have come to him, but there it was.

He waited until he was sure that Ash was asleep before speaking up. "I think we should take turns by the entrance tonight."

"Makes sense, someone could still stumble into us," Leaf agreed.

"Oh, yeah, there's that too, I guess."

Dawn blinked at him and tilted her head. "Why else would we keep watch?"

Cilan shifted uncomfortably. "To keep everyone in." His eyes flickered over to Ash, and the three girls instantly understood.

"You don't think he'd go outside and not come back, do you?" Serena asked him, sounding horrified at the prospect.

"No one needs to be a therapist to see that he's suffering through depression. You heard what he said about freezing. If he were to panic or something..." Cilan shrugged. "It might be overly cautious, but I would rather be that right now than to find out he woke up and stumbled outside in the middle of the night."

Dawn stared at him thoughtfully before turning around and whispering, "Pikachu?"

"Pi?" He opened his eyes and glanced at her, proving that he wasn't asleep like it seemed.

"Can you let Ria out? I don't know which Pokéball is hers."

Pikachu nodded and carefully moved to Ash's belt. He tapped one of the Pokéballs, and in a burst of light, the small Lucario appeared.

Ria glanced at Ash quickly before turning her attention to everyone else. "Is there something you need?"

"You can sense Ash's emotions – sometimes even what he intends to do. Think you could help us keep watch to keep him here?"

The Lucario slowly nodded her head. She glanced down at Ash, her brow furrowing slightly. She walked towards the entrance and closed her eyes. Anger flashed through her, and she snapped, "That idiot."

"Not disputing that at all, but why?" Leaf asked the Pokémon.

"The orb we seek is closer than you realize. I can feel its power. There's no way he hasn't felt it yet." She nodded towards Ash.

"Are you telling us he's ignoring it?" Cilan asked skeptically.

"Pikapi pi pikachu pi pika." Ria looked at Pikachu sharply. "Pika pika cha chu."

"Lu lucario luca cario?" It wasn't lost on anyone that she stopped using her telepathy, clearly wanting to keep them out of the conversation.

Pikachu shook his head sadly.

Ria sighed and looked at the cave's ceiling before looking at the four trainers. "He says that it wouldn't be the first one. Ash sensed one back in the Pinwheel Forest but didn't tell anyone."

Despite the roaring wind of the blizzard, it would have been easy to hear a pin drop. Serena's eyes went wide, Cilan looked flabbergasted, Leaf looked angry, and Dawn just seemed lost.

"Are you serious?" Leaf spoke, her voice slow.

"Why?" Dawn cried out in frustration. It said a lot that Ash didn't wake up. "Why would he do that? We have to go all the way back?"

"Pika!" Pikachu snapped at them, his fur bristling a little. No one needed to understand him to know that he was ready to defend his trainer, even if he didn't agree with his actions.

"It's not his fault," Cilan assured her, resting a hand on her shoulder. "Depression, especially something like PTSD, makes it hard to make choices sometimes. That's why we need to be supportive and help."

Leaf groaned and tugged at her hair. She shook her head and stood up. "We'll talk about it in the morning." She may have understood more than the others about how a mindset would influence his actions, but she still wasn't happy.

"Go to sleep," Ria told the others. "I'll stay with him. He won't go anywhere." There was so much conviction in her voice that no one doubted her.

As warm as they could be, with full stomachs and relatively comfortable places to sleep, everyone still found it difficult to fall asleep that night.

...

Dawn opened her eyes and looked at her watch, groaning a bit when she realized it was still the middle of the night. She was so tired, but at the same time, so restless. Pushing herself into a sitting position, she quickly realized that everyone else was still sound asleep, looking rather comfortable despite how hard it was to drift off in the first place. She was jealous of them.

Glancing over her shoulder, she eyed Ria, who was sitting at the entrance of the cave with her eyes closed. As Dawn stood up, she glanced over at her, proving that she wasn't asleep at all.

"Is the storm over?" Dawn asked quietly as she knelt beside the Pokémon.

"Yes," Ria answered. "For now, at least. It's not a normal one." She eyed the young teenager. "You should be asleep."

"I can't sleep." Dawn shook her head. She moved closer to the entrance and dug at the wall of snow, making one of the holes bigger so that she could see through. It was dark with only a sliver of the moon visible to light up the area. She watched her breath swirl in front of her.

"Hey, Ria," she said slowly, an idea growing in her mind. She looked around at the Pokémon. "You can sense the orb, right?"

"Yes?"

"Well..." Dawn trailed off, eyes flickering over to their slumbering friends. "What if we went to

find it? I know Ash has to get it, but we can still locate it to get there and back fast."

"That's risky."

"So is letting Ash decide where we should go." Dawn regretted the words as soon as she spoke them, but there was a bit of truth to it. She wanted to cry for her friend, because he deserved to get help and to have a long, relaxing vacation somewhere warm, but there was no time for that. There was no time for healing, and that just made the wounds worse. If it wasn't the end of the world on the line, she wouldn't care as much, but that was the problem. "We'll take Mamoswine. Please, Ria?"

"So impulsive," the Pokémon groaned as she stood up. "Alright. Let me tell Pikachu so he can keep an eye on Ash."

"Thank you." Dawn quickly moved to pull on her jacket and snow pants again, winding her scarf around her neck and shoving her hands into her gloves. The young girl wasn't quite sure why she felt the urge to do this, but it wouldn't go away. She didn't want to just contribute to the emotional welfare of others. She wanted to help, and she had one of the best Pokémon for moving in the snow.

Digging a bigger hole to get outside, Dawn breathed in the cold air, almost felt at home again. The winters in Sinnoh became bitterly cold, more so than any other region she had ever gone to; though they were in Unova, she still felt like she was on her home turf.

Ria appeared beside her, packing in the snow wall again. She nodded her head and said, "Let's go."

"Right." Dawn tossed Mamoswine's Pokéball into the air and gently shushed the Pokémon so he wouldn't be loud. "We need to go on a little trip and need your help."

Mamoswine nodded and knelt down, allowing Dawn to climb up onto his back. She patted the fur, a signal for Ria to get up as well. Once the Lucario was behind her, clearly not expecting to be riding on another Pokémon, Mamoswine stood.

Dawn glanced behind her and asked, "Where do we go?"

Ria closed her eyes before pointing to the side. "That way."

"Alright, let's go." She spoke with confidence that inspired her Pokémon to get up and start walking. She was sure that they were doing the right thing.

What could possibly go wrong?

...

Clemont stared out the window, looking down at the streets of Black City. Normally, he would have been fascinated to be in such a place, but he couldn't concentrate or stay focused. From a high floor in the building, he could see far beyond the city to the sprawling snow-covered fields, a forest in the distance. It was funny to know that they were so close to their destination, yet so far.

Team Plasma had vanished for the moment, allowing them to move within the upper floors of the building rather than just being confined to the basement, and he was glad. It was a bit inspiring to know that so many people were planning on striking back. He wanted to ask about the government's plan, but realized that it was probably like other regions. The main line of defense was the G-Men and that had been compromised badly in all regions.

The government and the Pokémon League were two separate entities. The league that spanned several regions was privately owned, but it held so much power and influence that sometimes people forgot there was more than just them. It seemed like even the government itself forgot at some point, since breaking that power structure really did a lot of damage.

He sighed and pressed his head against the window.

"Don't you look like the picture of pathetic?" Clemont jumped and looked towards the pink-haired girl they met up with earlier. Georgia, if he heard right.

She approached the window, pressing her hand against the cold glass. "I love the ice and cold, but I hate this." She looked over at him. "You were vague about your explanation earlier – you all were – but do you really think Ketchum can stop this?"

Realizing that she was referring to their weak explanation of what they were doing, Clemont shrugged. "Ash can do a lot of things. He's not normal. I knew that before I knew why. If anyone can, it's him."

Georgia snorted. "He's just a goofball from the boonies." She sighed and looked over at him. "We'll find you cars or something tomorrow. Benga wanted me to tell you. He puts a lot more stock in legends than I do." She turned to walk away.

"Thanks."

Georgia paused, glancing over her shoulder at him. "If you see a girl with curled purple hair..." She trailed off. "Never mind." She continued out of the room.

Clemont stared at the door and shook his head. That was an exchange he didn't expect at all, but it was telling. She was worried about someone. That was something he could relate to.

It wasn't something that he brought out often, but Clemont took a picture from the pocket on the front of his overalls. He was almost embarrassed that he had it there. It was a comfort some times.

He traced his finger over the image of his younger sister, just a newborn baby that he was holding as he sat beside his mother on her hospital bed. His father was beside them, a huge grin on his face.

There weren't many pictures of the four of them together.

Clemont sighed as he stared at his mother, who had the same blonde hair and blue eyes as he and Bonnie did. He wondered if she would be proud of him, or disappointed at leaving his little sister for so long.

"Just a little longer, Bonnie," he muttered. "I promise." Clemont looked out the window again, staring at the white forest. They were almost there.

...

Why did she have to wonder what could go wrong? That was just asking to be jinxed. She laid flat on Mamoswine's back, Ria kneeling in the snow beside them. No one moved, fearful of the Team Plasma grunts spotting them.

In retrospect, it was a stupid plan. It was true, she found the shrine, but she didn't expect to run into some sort of trouble. They had thought about retreating, but surely they would be spotted.

Dawn shifted a bit, slowly slinking down Mamoswine's side so that she could kneel beside Ria.

"Do you think it's okay to run?"

"Too risky. Mamoswine's too big and they'll notice you call him back." The fact that they weren't spotted already was amazing. Then again, the only reason that the grunts were looking in their direction at all was from the noise they had been making earlier.

Ria tensed up slightly, but then relaxed. Dawn looked at the Pokémon, about to ask what was going on, when a hand clamped over her mouth.

Her scream was muffled as she flailed, and Ria did something to keep Mamoswine from moving. She only stopped flailing when she heard a familiar, angry voice say, "Calm down!"

Dawn looked behind her, eyes meeting Leaf's annoyed ones. Crouching not far behind her was Cilan, Serena, Ash and Pikachu, all looking properly angry.

"Hi," she muttered sheepishly.

"What the hell, Dawn?" At first, she was completely taken back that Ash was the first one to growl at her. She expected him to just hang back and stare at the ground listlessly. Instead, he was staring at her with a fierce annoyance that she hadn't seen in a long time.

Bristling, she scowled at him as she pushed Leaf off of her. "I found the shrine."

"In the middle of the night without telling anyone?"

"Not like you were actually going to lead us there."

Ash was taken back, and then he shoulders slumped. His eyes turned to the snow, and she mentally berated herself for chasing him back into that quiet place in his mind.

"Never mind that," Cilan interrupted. "Is that the shrine down there?"

"Yeah." Dawn nodded her head. "I don't see Tornadus anywhere though, and Team Plasma is down there. They heard Mamoswine so we couldn't move."

Everyone moved to lay on the ground in their winter clothes, peering over the ledge cautiously. Serena's eyes darted from person to person below, before she asked, "Why are they all around the shrine?"

"Tornadus would have been hanging around here lately, and they probably want to take him out or capture him or something," Leaf answered. It was a pretty logical guess. "The orb is down there, right?"

"Yes," Ria answered, certainty in her voice.

"Look there." Cilan pointed at something on the ground. "They have a Pokéball jammer." That was either a sheer coincidence, or they were waiting for someone. He voiced those thoughts to everyone else.

"Probably not us," Dawn decided. "They wouldn't know we were coming."

"No, but they may have figured someone might try to help a legendary," Leaf reasoned. "I doubt they're going anywhere anytime soon."

"So what do we do?" Serena asked.

"We need a distraction," Cilan decided after a moment of thought. "Something big that will completely draw their attention from Ash sneaking to the shrine. If we need our Pokémon, we need to take them out up here."

"They'll notice us," Dawn warned him. "We'll lose our advantage."

Serena bit her lip and scanned the area around them before glancing up at Dawn's Mamoswine. An idea hit her, a wonderfully idiotic idea. "I think I know what we need to do, but Dawn, I'll need your help." She looked at the others. "You guys get down the hill and wait for the signal, then run. We'll hopefully be able to get rid of the jammer too."

"You sure?" Leaf asked them.

Dawn glanced at Serena curiously, but seeing the confidence on the girl's face, she nodded. "Yeah."

"Alright, let's get down this hill a bit," Cilan said, nudging Ash a bit.

The younger male stared at Dawn and Serena with something resembling panic, and it seemed like he was really struggling to say something. "Ria, stay with them."

"As long as it doesn't hinder their plans," the Lucario reasoned.

"No, it'll be fine," Serena assured her, willing to make the compromise for her friend's piece of mind. "Now go."

Ash finally gave up resisting Cilan and allowed himself to be tugged along by him, Leaf leading the way down the hill.

The three of them managed to get to the bottom unnoticed, but there was absolutely no way they'd get across the field without getting caught.

"We never asked what the signal was," Cilan realized.

"I think it's one of those we'll know it when we see it moments," Leaf replied. She twisted around to glance at Ash and Pikachu. "You still with us?"

"Yeah," he answered slowly, his eyes darting to the shrine and back to her.

"We'll talk about it later," she assured him. "Focus on this for now."

"It's not..." He trailed off. "Where's Tornadus?" Almost like an answer to his question, the wind began to pick up.

Team Plasma noticed it too, looking up at the sky.

Cilan nearly jumped out of his boots when he heard Mamoswine's great bellow, a reaction he shared with Team Plasma. The Pokémon barreled down the side of the hill, Serena guiding him with improvised rope reins. Dawn sat behind her, holding on for dear life. Ria slid after them, running at the jammer.

"I'd say that's the signal," Leaf said, and grabbed Ash's arm as she stood up. Without any hesitation, she led the way across the field, both boys following her.

"Hey!" one of the grunts yelled. "What are you doing?" Several of them turned away from the charging Mamoswine towards them.

"Shit." Leaf brought out one of her Pokéballs, looking around to see if Ria had managed to destroy the Pokéball jammer. An explosion and cursing answered her question, and a wicked grin appeared on Leaf's face. "Cilan, Ash, keep going. I got this." She tossed her Pokéball up into the air, unleashing a Houndoom. The Pokémon instantly started growling at the enemy.

"Come on." Cilan grabbed Ash's arm and started dragging him, Pikachu bounding behind them. There was yelling as Houndoom's fire unleashed upon their enemies, only for the heat to be doubled as Serena's Delphox made an appearance.

"Come on, keep going," Cilan encouraged him. They were almost to the shrine, when a sudden powerful gust of wind sent them both flying backwards. Cilan grunted as he landed in the snow, looking up with confusion. His face shifted to surprise and then terror as Tornadus loomed over him, shaped like a bird instead of the slightly more humanoid shape that it was commonly depicted in.

"Pikachu!" A powerful blast of electricity slammed into the legendary, who shrieked in pain and turned his attention to the Pokémon. Pikachu stood half way between the two boys, ready to defend both of them if need be.

"Wait!" Ash yelled as Tornadus turned to Pikachu, the wind picking up more. "Stop!" He only served to distract the Pokémon long enough for a Liepard that belonged to Team Plasma to jump up and attack it.

Vines latched onto the Liepard and it was thrown away. The small Bellossom that did the act looked quite proud of herself.

Tornadus roared again, and the wind picked up violently. Ash grimaced from the snow that flew in his eyes, vaguely able to see Pikachu darted as a Pokémon that he couldn't identify that was about to lash out as Cilan. A moment later, he completely lost sight of everyone else.

Slowly, Ash managed to get to his feet, taking a few steps away from the Pokémon before running as quickly as he could, as if the shrine was a safe spot. He slipped on the cold stone, slamming against it. Pain rushed up his arm, but he ignored it, groping inside until his hand came in contact with the orb.

Pulling it out, Ash stared at the smooth surface, watching the periwinkle light dance beneath the glass surface. Tornadus landed on top of the shrine and stared down at him curiously. Despite the Pokémon's rather docile gaze, Ash found himself panicking.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

He was shivering as his breath swirled in front of him in erratic puffs that he was trying to control, but somehow the sting of the cold didn't actually register in his brain.

His hand was shaking, clutched tightly around the periwinkle orb with a light merrily dancing in the center. It slipped a bit before he tightened his grip, smearing the blood on his hands over the glass surface. He hadn't even noticed that his collision with the shrine caused him to bleed.

His brown eyes scanned the area in front of him as his back pressed against the cool stone of the shrine behind him. His vision only went so far until it hit swirling walls of wind and snow – the storm that he was in the eye of. Beyond the howl of the wind, he could hear the yells of people and Pokémon he couldn't see.

'Move,' a voice screamed in his mind over and over again. A voice that sounded startling like his

from when he was much younger. 'You need to help them. Move!'

"I can't." His mumbled words fell against his chapped lips. "I can't."

Perhaps he should have listened to that voice in his head. A shower of sharp icicles shot from within the storm, sailing towards him at an alarming speed. Ash flinched backwards, but had nowhere else to go. A powerful blast of air gusted down from the sky, slamming the ice into the ground before it could touch him.

Heart beating madly, Ash looked up at Tornadus. The Pokémon glanced down at him and again descended, landing on the top of the shrine and staring out at the storm.

Ash slumped, his back sliding down the shrine until he was sitting in the snow, shielded by his blue snow-pants. He closed his eyes, clutching the orb to his chest.

How had it gotten to this point? Oh right, it was his fault. His fault because he was too scared, because they thought he was going to run away and Dawn set out on her own.

"Stop it!" the words escaped Ash's lips before he could even register what he was saying.

"Tornadus, please! Stop! They'll freeze in this!" He looked up at the Pokémon desperately, able to feel the panic and pain his friends were in. "Please." His voice cracked. "Don't let them pay for my mistakes."

Tornadus cried out, harsh eyes glaring at him. In that moment, Ash knew he wasn't about to stop. Nausea rushed through him at the realization that the Pokémon didn't care that his friends were caught in his attack against the enemy. Ash was the one the legendary Pokémon cared about, a part of him always knew this, but to actually see it made him sick.

"Stop!" He dropped the orb and threw his hands in the air, a rush of energy lashing out and colliding with the Pokémon. Tornadus was thrown up into the sky, the wind dying down as his concentration broke.

The Pokémon screeched in rage and Ash didn't have time to move. He collided with the stone floor of the shrine, the back of his head slamming into it roughly as Tornadus' talons dug into his shoulders. He blinked wildly, trying to get the black dots that threatened to take over his vision to go away. He could still see the betrayal in the Pokémon's eyes.

"I have to protect you," Ash said, looking away from the creature's intense gaze. He saw the blood that was starting to spread across the blue fabric of his coat and closed his eyes, not wanting to see that either. "I have to protect everyone from you too." He concentrated, trying to ignore the pain as Tornadus shifted, though the Pokémon still didn't let go of him. "I'm sorry."

Once again, Tornadus was thrown into the air by Ash's Aura, and this time, before it could attack him again, he threw up a shield that it crashed into. Raging, the Pokémon lashed out at the barrier, and Ash felt his arms wavering. Maybe he had a concussion or something, because shields were natural to him and unless it was something huge, he could normally do pretty well in holding things at bay for quite awhile. It was how he was able to save Gary, Leaf and himself from being crushed back in Johto. Now though, it took every ounce of concentration he had to keep Tornadus away.

Just when he felt his strength really wavering, electricity slammed into the Pokémon, causing it to collide with the shrine. Ash blinked, letting his arms fall to the ground as he inhaled sharply. Sleep felt like a really good idea at the moment.

"Ash!" Cilan appeared above him, looking completely alarmed. His hands hovered over Ash for a moment, like he wasn't sure what to do, before he unzipped his ripped coat. "I know, it's cold, but I need to see where you're hurt."

"Tornadus," Ash muttered. "Don't let Plasma hurt him."

"Leaf and Serena have Plasma on the run, don't worry," Cilan assured him before looking over his shoulder. "Dawn! Come here! The Pokémon will be okay!"

"I'm tired," Ash muttered as Dawn ran over to them, kneeling down on his other side. He hissed in pain when Cilan touched the back of his head.

"You probably have a concussion." He took out a little penlight and shined it into Ash's eyes, causing him to wince. "Your pupils are okay though. Still reacting to light. Come on, sit up for a second."

Ash tried to push himself up, but his shoulders protested the movements. Dawn reached out quickly, grabbing him to keep him steady as Cilan took his coat off of him. They both inhaled at the deep gashes on his shoulders. Luckily, nothing hit any of his arteries.

"Audino!" Cilan called out, tossing a Pokéball up into the air.

Ash glanced at the pink Pokémon. "Since when do you have a Audino?"

"I didn't stop catching Pokémon when I stopped traveling with you," Cilan responded. Where he might have been amused normally, he sounded very stressed. "I need you to use Heal Pulse on him, okay?"

"Dino!"

Ash knew what it felt like to be healed with Aura, and always found it strange, but there was something really weird to him about being healed with psychic energy. It wouldn't help with his concussion, he already knew that, but it did seal the wounds on his shoulders so that he wouldn't bleed all over everything.

It was still a little hard to focus – he felt dizzy – but Ash was still able to look up to see what was happening. Pikachu, Stunfisk and Pachirisu were fending off the raging Pokémon with relative ease, while Leaf and Serena were farther away, chasing off the Team Plasma grunts with Ria, Houndoom, Delphox, Mamoswine, Bellossom, Sylveon, Espeon and a Spiritomb (since when did Leaf have that?). As he saw Tornadus turn to leave, he knew that they'd be okay.

Ash slumped down against Dawn, breathing heavily. She carefully shook him and said, "Don't go to sleep."

"Myth," he muttered. "I can sleep with a concussion if I want."

"Not yet," Cilan replied. "If you can walk a little bit it'll be proof enough for me that you'll be okay to sleep, but then we need to get somewhere warm again."

"The cave?" Dawn asked.

"Plasma ran off in that general direction," Leaf said as she came over, trying to comb the snow that matted in her hair and wouldn't melt in the cold off. "There may still be some tracks left. It's too dangerous to go back."

Dawn shrunk down a bit. "I'm sorry."

"We got the orb and we fought them off," Serena said, smiling at her. She knelt down and picked up the sphere that Ash had dropped earlier. "It's okay."

"Right," Dawn answered. She looked around as Cilan helped Ash to his feet. The raven-haired boy stumbled a little bit, and Ria darted forward to catch him. Pikachu hurried to their side, ears drooping a bit.

Ash was able to steady himself enough to show Cilan that he could walk just fine. He was just so tired now.

"You know, Black City isn't that far from here. The others might have ended up there and even if they didn't, we need supplies," Dawn said thoughtfully. She got them into this mess and was determined to think of a way to get them out.

"She has a point," Serena agreed. "Maybe we could take Mamoswine there?" She looked at Dawn, who nodded in response.

"Not everyone will fit on there," Leaf pointed out.

"Charizard," Ash said, reaching down to the Pokéball. "Charizard can take two of us."

"Alright," Cilan clapped his hands together. "Dawn, Serena and I will stay on Mamoswine. Ash and Leaf can go on Charizard." He glanced at Leaf. "I'm assuming you can handle him." He nodded at Ash.

Leaf snorted. "I can handle the normal, crazy Ash Ketchum on a bad day. This Ash is no problem." It actually lifted her spirits a bit to see him look so affronted by her words. It was so much better than the apathy that seemed so common with him these days.

"Alright," Dawn said with a nod of her head. "Let's head to Black City."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

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Catch And Release

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Iris didn't get much sleep that night. She was completely wound up with anticipation and worry, curling up in the corner with Emolga and her sleeping bag. She was used to sleeping in the most random places, even if that meant twisting in random positions in a tree, so it wasn't that. She just couldn't get her mind to stop screaming at her. The White Forest was very close to them, but there was no telling if Cilan and the others had gotten there or not. If Ash was still the Ash that she remembered he would have urged them on no matter what, but he was broken and needed their help and she wasn't sure he was going to be much help.

She was the first one awake, and that was saying something since she was sure no one else slept well wither. She stretched and prompted Emolga to stay quiet and slowly crept out of the room.

The Black Tower was an eerie structure, looming high above Black City. Iris knew that trainers were supposed to battle their way up the tower but there were rumours that once they got up so high, they never came back. Of course, she also knew that wasn't entirely true, but being inside the building put her on edge and she felt like she was always being watched.

Movement caught her eye and she took a couple steps back to peer into the room that she almost bypassed. A shock of fiery hair caught her attention, and she carefully walked forward, recognizing who it was.

"Hey, Iris," Benga said without turning around. It took her a moment to realize that he could see her reflection in the window. "Can't sleep well? I know your friend, Clementine was up earlier too. Georgia was talking to him."

"Clemont," she corrected, her brow furrowing slightly. She hoped Georgia was nice to him, since Clemont was mostly just a sweet and incredibly intelligent boy. Perhaps a bit on the crazy side but she could deal with Cilan so he was no problem. The thought of Cilan made her stomach twist uncomfortably. "No, I can't sleep. I'm just...worried."

"Feels like it's been forever since we met at Drayden's gym, huh?" Benga asked, actually looking at her.

When they first met, Iris had been recently taken in by Drayden for a bit and Alder had come to visit the gym with his grandson in tow. Instantly Iris felt a form of kinship with Benga - they were very much alike - but it really did feel like that happened in another lifetime at this point. "Yeah. Everything's different now."

"No matter what happens, the world's going to change." He grimaced, looking much more serious than Iris had ever seen him. "Look how quickly and how badly Team Rocket managed to make their move. Maybe they were working in the system for a long time but that's even worse. Public's not going to trust anyone at the top of the food chain in the leagues now, and maybe that's for the best. Out with the old and in with the new, you know?"

"I suppose." Her mind flashed to Ash, knowing that his goal was to one day beat Pokémon Master Red but she was unsure if the Master was still alive or not. "Is that why you're so willing to help us? If I was you and someone showed up spouting a story about a boy who could save the world because Arceus wanted him to, I'd laugh and kick them out." Or she would have at one point in time.

"Well, to be fair Cynthia managed to call ahead to my grandfather," Benga admitted. "She wanted you guys to have some support here."

That made a lot of sense to Iris now that she thought about it.

"But," he stressed, "I believe you myself too. I don't have any proof or real reason behind it, I just do." The sudden, wide grin he sent her was almost surprising. "And since I'm the last top dog that's left here, what I say goes."

"Top dog? What is this place?"

"Hmm...oh...it's recruitment for the G-Men." His blunt honesty surprised her. "We start looking at potential recruits when they get to a certain floor of our little battle tournament. If they can get up to me we go out of our way to try and bring people in. It's not widely known, most people just think this is a fun tournament set up by a rich CEO or something - that's what Team Plasma thought when they went through here and that's what they'll keep thinking." He winked. "Hiding in plain sight."

That actually made a ton of sense and Iris was surprised that it never occurred to her before. Hiding in plain sight indeed.

"The trainers that get to me are usually amazing." Benga sat on top of his desk and crossed his legs, motioning to the chairs for Iris to sit, as if he was a teacher about to tell an exciting story to his class. Iris decided to sit to listen. "Maybe that's why I believe so much. I know there are amazing people out there. Fighting for something greater than ourselves will call out our finest heroes. It shouldn't be a surprise to anyone that when the world's in danger, they start appearing. Some from choice, some from fate, some from a bit of both." He grinned at her. "I think you and your friends are a bit of both, even your friend Ash that you mentioned."

Iris held Emolga close to her as she thought on that. It didn't alleviate her fears at all, but she was actually glad that Benga didn't ask about it. There was really no reason, since everyone was worried about someone or something.

The sound of footsteps in the hall caught her attention and Iris looked around as a girl with bright

blue eyes and long, brown hair tied into a ponytail and under a cap, appeared in the doorframe. Her hand was raised to knock, but upon seeing the two people inside staring at her, she simply entered instead.

"You're up early," Benga noted, more amused than anything else.

The girl waved her hand. "I'm just excited to actually get to do something today." Her eyes turned to Iris. "Hi, I'm Hilda LeBlanc and you're Iris Stephens, right? It's nice to meet you." She held out her hand.

At first, Iris was taken aback by how straight-forward she was, but she had to admire that too. Shifting Emolga onto her shoulder, she reached out and clasped the girl's hand - her grip was strong but not intimidating. "Yeah, I'm Iris. It's nice to meet you too."

"Hilda here - and her partner Hilbert - will be getting you a new set of vehicles to use to get to your friends," Benga said.

"Oh? I thought Georgia or Trip..."

"They're doing other things. Can't shake up missions just to accommodate some new people, right?" Benga raised an eyebrow at Iris, who just nodded her head. He then looked at Hilda.

"Where is your other half anyway?"

"Stalking the cafeteria, waiting for them to start breakfast," Hilda admitted. She took out her phone and typed something on it quickly before turning it off.

Iris still got the chance to see the screen, and what she saw surprised her. "Was that Cheren and Bianca?"

"Hmm...oh!" Hilda laughed and turned the background of her phone on again. "Yeah. I grew up with them and still see them sometimes. I take it you know them?"

"Yeah. I was friends with Bianca and we met Cheren before too. Do you know if they're...?" Iris was hesitant to ask what she wanted to know.

"Alive?" Hilda supplied bluntly, not flinching from it. "Yeah. They're both fine." Her phone buzzed and she glanced at it. "Hilbert says that they've started serving food. You should get your friends up and meet us down there. We'll explain what's happening today. Sound good?"

"Yeah," Iris answered, and she was gone in a blur of black, white and pink. Iris blinked and looked at Benga curiously.

He laughed. "She and Hilbert were two that we recruited here. He almost got to me. She beat me." Benga smiled. "Mark my words - after this is over - she's going to be the one to bring down my grandfather. We can take bets on it."

"You sound confident that everything will be the same after this is over."

"No, it won't, at all. That's why she'll beat him."

Iris didn't completely understand, but maybe he could see something that she couldn't yet. It was too early and she was far too tired to dwell on it though. Instead, she decided to go and wake up her friends to eat. The sooner they got moving, the sooner they could find the others and that would be one less thing to worry about.

...

Misty always wondered what Gary Oak would have been like if his smugness and his ego had never existed, and she felt like she finally had the answer when she met Hilbert Blake. He had such a similar sense of humour and reacted to many things in a similar way, but there was a lightness to him, a genuine warmth that Gary didn't have. Though not quite as intelligent as Gary, he wasn't as sarcastic or occasionally judgmental as him either.

Then again, Misty thought, his friend Hilda reminded her of Leaf too. She had the same intensity and self-assuredness that Leaf did, but she was so much more open and friendly.

Misty wondered if Gary and Leaf would have been like that if their friendship and lives hadn't been twisted and broken apart when they were younger. It would have been interesting to see all four of them interact, not just Gary, Hilbert and Hilda. They needed to find Leaf for that to even be a possibility - though Hilbert and Hilda were only taking them as far as getting them new vehicles to use.

Stomach twisting in knots, Misty walked through the crowded sidewalks of Black City with Hilbert and Gary, knowing that Hilda, Iris, Clemont and May were somewhere nearby as well. They would draw less attention in smaller groups, but she was still nervous and once again tried to tuck her orange hair under the beanie that she had been given. She just wanted to hurry up and get these new cars so that they could find Ash and the others.

The redhead had no doubt that they would have found the shrine and the orb by now. She just knew that they did, but Hilbert already made it clear that getting through the White Forest would have meant ditching their SUV, so they would have been at the mercy of the weather. That was a part of her desperation to find them. Ash's description of the cold and just falling asleep echoed through her mind and tugged at her chest painfully.

They needed to get moving to find them.

Hilbert suddenly stopped, causing Gary to crash into him, and Misty to crash into him in turn. The two Kantonian trainers looked at the other boy with confusion.

"This is bad," Hilbert muttered under his breath, brown eyes darting across the scene before him. Misty and Gary peered around him and saw what the problem was. In front of them, where they planned on getting their new vehicles, Hilda was talking to a group of Team Plasma agents. One woman in front was dressed differently and looked entirely too skeptical. May was standing between Iris and Clemont, holding onto both of their sleeves and biting her lip nervously while Iris looked like she wanted to punch someone and Clemont appeared very nervous.

May glanced their direction, panicked eyes locking onto Misty's. She seemed to realize that she was staring just a bit too long and quickly looked away, but it was enough to prompt one of the Plasma grunts to look around at them. He quickly muttered something to the woman.

"You three! Get over here!" she yelled. People scooted away from them, suddenly appearing nervous.

Hilbert and Gary both hesitated, but Misty just squared her shoulders and stormed towards them while silently grinding her teeth. The two boys protested but then followed her silently.

The woman looked at Misty and said, "I recognize you."

"I doubt that." She crossed her arms in front of her.

"Are you sure?" The woman motioned for one of the men to turn his tablet around, and Misty was fairly certain that her heart stopped. She was staring at a picture of Ash on a wanted memo from Team Rocket. The man swiped his finger across the screen, bypassing pictures of Leaf and Serena before landing on one of Clemont (whose nervousness made sense), then Gary, and then her. Luckily, there didn't seem to be one for May, Dawn, Iris, or Cilan yet.

Hilbert tensed beside Misty, and she saw him learn slightly to catch Hilda's eyes. The girl looked grim, but her hand twitched towards her belt.

Everything felt like it was suddenly moving in slow motion to Misty. These people knew who they were and confirmed that Team Rocket still wanted Ash and those with them that they knew about. These people were going to capture them, probably to use as some form of bait. Normally, that would have been enough to lure Ash into a trap since he would only think about saving his friends and not himself, but at the moment it would just make things so much worse. It could be the final thing that makes him snap.

A sudden fierce wave of anger overcame Misty as time seemed to speed up again and she snatched her own Pokéball before Hilda could. These people thought that they could tear the world apart, they thought that they could control them all just because they could use some fake legendary Pokémon. They were ruining so many innocent lives - both people and Pokémon alike.

Misty and her friends were teenagers. They were supposed to be having fun journeys with the potential for a bit of peril in them, not journeys where they faced death head on with small moments for smiles. She pictured all of her friends and family - those who were alive, those who weren't, and those whose fates were still unknown. She pictured a snotty, 10-year-old boy who loved Pokémon more than anything and whose bright brown eyes were always lit up with adventure and excitement. Then she pictured the broken down teenager she saw last and her wave of anger turned into an explosion as time sped up again.

Gyarados appeared with a mighty roar and maybe Misty yelled something, she couldn't really remember, but the only thing that stopped the torrent of water he unleashed was some Unovian Pokémon that Misty didn't recognize offhand.

"What are you doing?" Gary yelled at her.

"If they want a fight, I'll give them a fight," Misty snarled back. Was she acting irrationally? She pictured her sisters - she pictured Violet who had sent her pictures from Black City once, brimming with smiles over the fact that she managed to capture the heart of a famous Unovian actor. She pictured Violet who had been pregnant with that same man's child. She pictured the nightmarish image that her mind conjured of Violet dead after a tsunami that should have never happened.

A Zebstrika lashed out at Gyarados, only for Iris' Excadrill to launch himself out of the ground at the attacker.

To hell with rationality, Misty fumed, she was ready to fight.

...

May was nervous the entire morning, too many things had gone wrong and with both Dawn and Serena somewhere else, she found it a bit difficult to see the bright side of things. Still, she had to admire Hilda a bit, since the girl was so self-confident as she led them through the streets of Black City with no fear.

She acted sweet and a bit oblivious to the members of Team Plasma when they first approached.

They were checking out any groups of young people that they came across apparently.

She thought that they were safe until one of the men told the woman that was clearly in charge something under his breath, showing her his tablet, and then they both looked at Clemont suspiciously.

May had no idea how everything went downhill from there. One minute she had glanced around looking for the quickest escape route and accidentally caught Misty's eyes, and the next there was pure chaos erupting around her.

Her hand hovered over her bag where she had her Pokéballs hidden. For a moment, she saw herself standing in a prison, hovering over someone who was already defeated and demanding more blood.

Then she saw Dawn. Sweet Dawn who had more inner strength than she seemed to think. The girl who had insisted that they have mock battles whenever they stopped. May hadn't hurt her once, because she chose not to and her Pokémon weren't cold-blooded killers.

Her hand grasped one of her Pokéballs and she threw it into the air. "Altaria!" The cloud-like Pokémon appeared and waited for her trainer to call out a command. May looked at the chaos around her. "Use Mist!"

Altaria trilled and flew above all of those who were fighting, unleashing a wave of moisture into the air that made it hard for anyone to see.

"Good thinking!" Hilda trilled at her before turning back to her own Pokémon. May felt a rush of pride go through her.

She was quickly distracted as Clemont's Chesnaught blocked the Garbodor that had been sneaking up on her. The blond hurried to her side, blue eyes peering down at her with obvious worry though he said nothing. May could still see his relief when he realized that she was alright.

Iris' scream startled them all. May and Clemont whipped around, faintly able to see Misty and Gary doing the same through the mist.

There was a flash of red and a loud roar that seemed to echo in three directions at once.

...

When Dragonite hit the ground, surrounded in a thick ice coating thanks to Plasma's stupid Vanilluxe, Iris felt like pummeling that specific Pokémon herself. She hurried to the miserable dragon's side, wincing at the feel of the ice below her fingers. She hated the cold and couldn't imagine being encased in it.

"It's okay," she whispered. "You'll be just fine." She grabbed Dragonite's Pokéball and called him back. Iris sighed and held the Pokéball close to her, but saw a streak of glowing blue head towards her out of the corner of her eye. She gasped and jerked out of the way just in time, the Ice Beam slamming into the ground beneath her.

Iris screamed louder than she meant to as her feet slid on the surface and she fell to the ground.

"Grab her Pokéballs and check them. We don't have a jammer but make sure they're locked," Iris heard the woman say and someone was at her side in an instant. She twisted around and kicked the man, but he already had one of her Pokéballs in his hand.

Iris' eyes went wide in terror as he thought he was locking it, but that specific one was already

programmed to stop the Pokémon from escaping, so instead, he undid it.

She tried to warn him, it was on the edge of her lips when the Pokéball opened and Hydreigon exploded out of it in a wave of bright energy.

Iris rolled out of the way as quickly as she could, scrambling to her feet and backing away. Hydreigon roared angrily, narrow eyes becoming slits when he realized who he was surrounded by. Iris knew what he was thinking. Those were the emblems of the people his original trainer abandoned him for. They were the enemy.

He roared again and this time blue fire escaped his mouth. The man yelled and just barely managed to get away, dropping the Pokéball in the process. Iris' stomach dropped in fear when Hydreigon stepped on the sphere, crushing it beneath his feet.

There was no way for her to call the poor dragon back. There was no way for her to protect him anymore.

He snarled, heads snapping at anything that dared get close to him. Iris took a couple steps back as he turned towards her and advanced. She had never really felt nervous being face to face with a dragon Pokémon before, but she couldn't help it this time. She could feel his rage and anger that stemmed from abandonment and betrayal.

Hydreigon opened his mouth, but then a blazing blue beam like the one that the Vanilluxe used earlier slammed into the dragon. He hit the ground and rolled a bit, snarling in the process. Iris' head snapped up as a Mamoswine burst through the mist, and her heart leapt into her throat when she recognized Dawn, Serena and Cilan on the Pokémon's back.

Cilan slid off of Mamoswine and ran over to her. "Are you alright?" His green eyes darted across her face, no doubt looking for injuries. "What's going on?"

"Plasma found us," Iris said, choosing not to go into a big explanation. She also chose not to ask how they got there and how the heck their timing was so good. Belaying the questions proved to be a good choice, since Hydreigon was getting up on one side of her and a Team Plasma grunt dressed as a knight was coming from the other direction. Apparently backup was here.

Then her mental process stopped. The Team Plasma that they were dealing with had the pirate-like costumes.

A Purrloin rushed by them, launching itself at a Watchog that the other faction of Team Plasma released. Cilan was so distracted that he didn't even cringe at the evolution of the Pokémon that he was sure Arceus created just to spite him.

"We need to get out of here!" Serena called out as she slid off of Mamoswine's back. She waved at Dawn, who gave her a thumbs up and took off on her Pokémon, breaking through a crowd of fighting Plasmas.

Hydreigon, with nothing else to distract him, turned towards them and hissed. They all backed up a bit, flinching as blue fire suddenly rained down upon the Pokémon. It roared in frustration and looked up just in time to see an odd Charizard swoop down. It took Iris a moment to realize she was looking at a Mega Charizard Y rather than just a normal one. It took her another moment after that to realize that Ash and Leaf were on the Pokémon's back.

Charizard landed between them and Hydreigon, and the two trainers slid off of him easily. Ash stared at the dragon-type, concern etched across his features.

"What the hell is going on?" Leaf called out, brown eyes trying to take in everything unsuccessfully.

"We were-" An SUV suddenly streaked to a stop beside them, and the driver, Hilda, laid her hand on the horn. "Okay, I guess we did get a ride," Iris corrected herself.

"Then let's go!" Leaf urged them as she hurried towards it. She glanced at Hilda. "Uh...hi."

"Introductions later, running now," Hilda insisted. Leaf was not one to argue with that, Serena hurrying in behind her.

Cilan was about to follow them but noticed that Ash and Iris hadn't moved. "Guys, come on!"

"Pikapi," Pikachu said sadly, his ears flattening against his head.

"He's so angry and sad," Ash muttered, brown eyes staring at Hydreigon while holding Charizard's Pokéball. "Call him back."

"I can't, his ball was destroyed!" Iris cried out. Hydreigon lashed out at Charizard, who seemed to be simply avoiding the attacks while also distracting it.

A heavy weight settled on Iris' chest. She knew what she had to do, but she didn't like it at all. "Call Charizard back and wait in the SUV. Just for a minute."

"Iris..."

"Ash. Please."

He hesitated before returning Charizard to his Pokéball, his faintly glowing mega stone becoming dim. He walked backwards, watching Iris as Hydreigon looked around in confusion.

"Hydreigon!" Iris called out to him. She could see Plasma grunts starting to edge close to them again. "You have to run! You have to fly away!" She could feel how the Pokémon was honestly startled by her words. "Your trainer was wrong to do what she did and I had hoped I'd be enough to save you, but I wasn't. I'm not. And I'm sorry. I didn't want you to end up with them, but it was selfish of me to take you. I should have set you free a while ago. I'm sorry!" Tears slowly fell from her eyes and it was like nothing else was happening around her. "Please. I just want you to be happy again. Please fly away so they don't hurt you." She sniffed. "You're free now."

The more she spoke, the calmer the Pokémon seemed to be. All three heads regarded her, but Iris wasn't afraid, not even when he took a step closer to her.

The middle head huffed and then the Pokémon launched himself into the air. Iris watched him go until she knew he was out of range of either faction of Team Plasma.

"Iris," Cilan called out softly to her. She looked over her shoulder, seeing that he was still waiting outside of the vehicle for her. She took one last look at the sky before scurrying over to them and getting in the SUV, a small piece of her heart cracking with every step that she took.

...

Gary's hands were shaking as they approached the Black Tower, Hilbert driving carefully through the streets. Gary wasn't sure if he was anxious, angry or something else entirely, but he felt like he was about to burst.

A flash of orange in the side mirror caused the rage he was trying to keep in to bubble up more. He just kept telling himself that now was not the time. Instead, he looked the other way, towards a flash of blue instead. "You sure everyone's okay, Dawn?"

"Last I saw them, yeah." The young teenager nodded her head from where she and May were sharing a single seat. "No frostbite or anything either. Luckily."

"Yeah..." Gary trailed off when he realized that Hilbert was going around to a back alley, and instantly was suspicious. "What are you doing?"

"You can't jump out of here in public," he explained. "Hilda's going to meet us back here and you guys can take off to wherever you need to go next. We'll head back to the Tower."

"Thank you," May spoke up, leaning forward a bit. "I mean it. That could have gone really wrong, so thank you for helping us." Clemont nodded his head in agreement.

Hilbert smiled slightly. "Hey, if we can save the world, it's worth putting ourselves at risk."

Gary felt the rage starting to come back again. The SUV slowed, and he narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the one that was already at their meeting place. A bit of relief rushed through him when he saw Iris climb out, a feeling that only intensified when he saw Cilan, Serena, Ash and Leaf with her.

Hilbert came to a stop and turned off the vehicle before he climbed out, meeting Hilda halfway between the two. Gary watched them talk to one another briefly before he felt someone brush by him. He caught sight of orange again, and this time he acted.

Misty yelped with surprise when Gary grabbed her arm, squeezing it tightly. She narrowed her green eyes at him. "Let go."

"What the fuck was that?" he growled at her.

"Gary, I'm warning you-"

"No! I mean it! What the fuck was that?" He didn't mean to yell, but he couldn't stop himself.

"Gary, what...?" Leaf trailed off as she looked at him with wide eyes.

His relief at seeing her again was overshadowed by his anger at Misty, and that fact just made it worse. "I'll tell you what! She started that entire mess!"

"I did not!" Misty hissed angrily.

"You attacked first! You didn't even give us a chance to try and figure out something else!" Misty's glare wavered slightly and she opened her mouth to speak but he didn't let her. "No! I don't want to hear it! People probably died back there because of you!" He was about to go off on a tirade when a snowball created from the very dirty snow that was around them hit the side of his face.

"Stop it!" Serena yelled, already creating another one in her hand. "Screaming won't help!"

"He's...not entirely wrong," Hilbert spoke up, startling everyone. He looked a bit embarrassed as they looked at him. "Sorry to just break in on a conversation, but yeah, she did attack first. There probably wouldn't have been another way out of that situation, but still."

Leaf had no idea who this boy was, but he and the girl that introduced herself as Hilda had helped

them, so she decided to take his words as an objective third party. Her brow furrowed slightly, and she was about to question Misty, but stopped before any words could get out. The former gym leader's lip was quivering, and she was shaking lightly, desperately trying to keep her composure. Her eyes were watery and rimmed with red, her cheeks turning a blotchy shade of pink already.

For a moment, Leaf saw herself pulling a trigger to save Clemont's life. A quick glance towards May was enough to tell her that the younger girl was having a similar realization.

Misty knew what it felt like to drown - and this was similar to that. She felt like her throat was closing in, like she couldn't breathe under everyone's stares. Movement caught her attention and she looked over, eyes meeting a worried bright brown. It wasn't just worry though, it was understanding too. There was absolutely no judgment on Ash's face, and that was what broke her.

She collapsed to her knees and buried her face in her hands as loud sobs wracked her entire body. Someone knelt in front of her on the cold, hard ground, and there was absolutely no doubt in her mind who it was. She lurched forward, wrapping her arms around Ash's torso as she buried her face into his jacket and cried.

Misty cried for her actions and the people that may have been hurt. She cried for her friends and how they were pulled into this awful adventure. She cried for the people whose lives everywhere were ruined. She cried for the Pokémon that were lost to human selfishness. She cried for Leaf who had to take another person's life. She cried for May who lost someone she loved before she even knew she loved him. She cried for Ash. She cried for her nephew that would never be born. She cried for her sisters. Most of all, she cried for herself.

She was aware of Ash holding her close, and of Pikachu nuzzling her cheek. He helped her stand up and soon they were walking. It was a bit awkward, since she didn't want to let him go, but he managed to move her to his side, letting her lean on him heavily. Misty had no idea how Ash managed it, probably with help, but soon she found herself in the very back of one of the SUVs with him.

Her loud sobs turned into wet hiccups and gasps, her head pounding loudly. She was vaguely aware of Serena leaning back to help buckle her in before Ash tugged her close to his side, letting her lean her head on his shoulder. Pikachu moved onto her lap, nuzzling his face to her stomach.

The arm that Ash had wrapped around Misty rose up, his hand resting gently on her head. He didn't play with her hair or force her to look at him, he just held her. He didn't try to shush her, or give any types of reassurances that everything would be okay. He just let her lean on him and silently sob.

She managed to look up at him once, and he glanced down at her. Even now, she could see that he wasn't okay either, but her finally cracking did not make it worse like she feared. A part of her felt a bit stupid for thinking that she had to be strong because of course she didn't have to. She closed her eyes and leaned on him again, hugging Pikachu close to her.

That was really all she needed for now.

...

"So, Ash lied to us and now we have to backtrack?" Gary sounded exhausted to Dawn from his spot in the back of the SUV.

"It won't be too bad," Cilan assured him from the driver's seat. "There are back roads and everything to get there from here. We don't have to go through any bridges or checks, and we have

these cars legally. Right, Iris?"

"Hmm?" She looked up from the passenger seat. He repeated his statement. "Oh. Yeah. It'll be fine."

May huffed slightly and glanced back at Gary. "Don't flip out at Ash when we stop."

"May!" Dawn nudged her sharply. The brunette just made a face.

Gary groaned and flopped down onto his side. "I know, I know. I'll apologize to her."

"You know..." Cilan trailed off, sounding almost reluctant. "I don't really think you need to." That made all three girls stare at him with skeptical expressions. "Well, maybe for yelling at her, but I think that she needed that. She needed to let it all out."

Dawn thought back to her feeling of panic when Misty, always strong and furious Misty, broke into some of the most heart-wrenching sobs that she had ever heard. A bit of shame hit her at her own thoughts. Misty was more than just an unwavering force of nature. She was a person and there was no doubt that everything was hard on her too. Cilan was probably right.

"Will she be okay?" May asked, her voice much softer now.

"That's hard to answer," Cilan responded. "I guess we'll have to see. A long drive, some sleep, some food, and just having everyone with her may help. It might help everyone." He thought back to his own brothers, knowing that he was a bit of a hypocrite for insisting that Misty needed to break down over her sisters when he pushed away the thought of his.

Everything would come in time.

...

Georgia tapped her fingers impatiently, wondering what kind of call was coming through for her at a Pokémon Center now. Surely it wasn't her parents, and she couldn't think of anyone else who may have been calling different ones looking for her. At least, no one that she would dare hope to believe was searching for her at this point. She glanced out of the corner of her eye at Trip, who was patiently waiting for her but staying far enough away to give her privacy.

The call connected, and when the screen came to life, she felt her breath catch in her throat. She knew those violet eyes anywhere. "Burgundy."

Relief shone on the other girl's face. "Georgia. You're okay."

Georgia's eyes locked onto the two boys farther back on the screen, one with red hair and one with blue, but then focused on her friend again. No one else there mattered right now.

...

It wasn't exactly legal, but Leaf let Clemont drive the SUV. Sure, there were two other licensed drivers in the vehicle aside from her, but Misty and Ash weren't the best candidates for that at the moment. Leaf herself was far too tired and had fallen asleep across the middle seats fairly quickly.

Ash, Misty, and Pikachu were all asleep curled up in the very back, while Serena sat up front with him.

Clemont glanced out of the corner of his eye at her. "You can get some sleep too." It was clear

after exchanging stories that while his group got very little sleep the night before, it was better than them.

Serena smiled at him and shook her head. "I'd rather stay awake with you."

His cheeks turned pink and he carefully made sure to follow the other SUV in front of them.

"Clemont?" Serena spoke up a moment later. He hummed a bit in response, though he didn't look at her. "After this orb...we'll probably be going home, won't we?"

Home. That was certainly an odd thought, but she was probably right. They'd probably be asking Giratina to take them to Kalos very soon. For a moment, he worried about what could have happened there, but surely Team Flare couldn't have caused many problems, since Champion Diantha had taken them down very recently. Just before the tournament when Ash had gone on his own for a little while to do some training. At the time, Clemont hadn't understood why, but in retrospect he realized that Ash was probably actively using his Aura during training and didn't want them to see. It was strange to think that there was a time he didn't know what his friend could do.

Actually, in retrospect, Ash was probably involved with the whole Team Flare fiasco and just hadn't told them.

"We're almost there," Clemont spoke up after sorting his thoughts. "We have almost all of the orbs."

"Then what?"

"I guess we wait and see what Arceus says." Clemont didn't really enjoy this thought but it was all that they could go on. "We're so close, Serena."

"Will you go home after?" she asked him, leaning against her window a bit.

"It depends. If home is okay, I might go and help somewhere else however I can." He glanced in the rear view mirror at their sleeping friends. "Maybe just be there with them for a little while longer to support them. What about you?"

She could go back and take up the offer to train for the Performances, but that seemed a bit selfish to her. Eventually, Serena would get back to that, but maybe Clemont had the right idea. "I guess we'll see."

...

It was decided that everyone needed to stop and get some rest. So once they were positive that they were out of the ice and cold and into the slightly milder climate of Unova, they pulled the vehicles off the road and everyone gathered outside in a clearing. They didn't make a fire, not wanting to attract any attention, instead using each other as a form of warmth.

Gary felt a bit awkward. He was between Leaf and Ash, but the latter was curled up with Misty and Pikachu, though none of them were asleep yet. He glanced at them out of the corner of his eye, wondering why it was so embarrassing just to see two people lay on one another without doing anything else. Friends could have done it too to keep warm.

Maybe the problem wasn't them. Maybe it was him.

He sighed and shifted onto his side. "Misty?" There was a pause before the girl glanced up at him.

He felt Leaf shift behind him, no doubt paying attention, and though Ash kept his eyes locked onto the starry sky, Gary knew he was listening. "I wanted to apologize. I don't always handle stress well. I shouldn't have flipped out at you."

Misty nodded her head. "I acted selfishly. It's okay."

"It's not. I mean, maybe you did, but hell maybe we all need to be a little more selfish. I should have handled it better." He frowned. "It's not the first time. I became a complete asshole when my parents died. Everyone deals with things different and this...I guess this is just me." He huffed. "Hell, someone once said to me, 'Gary, I know you're sad but you can't let that win because if it does you'll always be sad, so just talk to me'. I didn't listen and I regret that." Ash twitched at those words and glanced at him. "You remember, right, Ash?"

"Yes." Ash frowned. "But I was stupid. We can't help what we feel."

"Yeah, but we can't let it overcome us like I let it. It's easy. Fighting is harder."

There was a long pause before Misty said, "I forgive you."

Gary smiled at her, but was startled as someone spoke up from behind him. "I forgive you too."

"Leaf?" He rolled on his back, and Ash pushed himself (and Misty) up onto his forearms so he could see the girl.

Leaf stared up at the sky, not looking at them. "It's not a coincidence that you, Ash and I became friends again. Maybe it was because of our parents at first, but maybe the three of us were always meant to be in each other's lives. Hell, we're all even exactly a month apart - all born on the 22nd of consecutive months. You're right Gary, you and I weren't strong enough. We gave in to sadness and fear, but here we all are years later and I'm done believing in coincidence. I forgave Ash. He forgave both of us. I never actually forgave you...so now I am."

"Thank you," Gary breathed out, reaching a hand to hers and gripping it tightly.

Ash listened to them until their breathing turned heavy, letting him know that they were asleep. He sighed deeply, and Misty shifted a bit to look up at him. He glanced at her before looking back to the sky. "Can everyone forgive me though?"

"Forgive you? For what?"

"Being a weak hypocrite." His felt his stomach twist. "Another legendary Pokémon could be dead because I didn't want to finish what we started."

"Maybe she is," Misty agreed, "but you have nothing to apologize for. It's okay to not be okay...isn't it?" The last part came out as an almost desperate squeak.

Ash blinked and looked down at her again. He nodded his head. "Of course it's okay for you to cry and to not be okay, Mist. It's better than..." Ash trailed off, his breath hitching. It was okay. It was okay for her to feel despair and pain. It was better than keeping it locked away. She was able to accept this so easily, because she saw it in him. She knew it was okay for him to not be okay.

It was alright.

Ash shifted, careful not to roll on Pikachu who was resting above his head on the grass. He moved onto his side and tugged Misty close, burying his face in her hair as she hugged him tightly. Maybe they both cried a bit silently, Ash didn't know. It didn't matter if they did though, because it was

okay to not be okay.

...

It had been a long time since Misty had driven, but she insisted on it, feeling much better after her breakdown yesterday. Dawn and May were sitting in the back, reminiscing about contests that they had participated in, while Cilan and Iris sat in the middle seats, both quietly watching out the windows. Out of the corner of her eye, Misty glanced at Ash and Pikachu, the latter sleeping peacefully on his trainer's lap.

Misty wondered how Gary, Leaf, Clemont and Serena were doing in the other vehicle but decided not to think on it too much. They'd be fine.

"I hope Hydreigon's okay," Iris said suddenly. May and Dawn immediately stopped talking, Cilan looked over at her and Ash twisted around slightly. Iris didn't even bother looking at them, but Ash could see just how sad she looked.

"He will be," Ash said, startling everyone. "It's always good to put your Pokémon before yourself, and sometimes that means letting them go. It's hard, but it's for the best." He looked down. "He felt so confused, angry, and betrayed to me."

"Me too," Iris agreed. "I wanted to help him but..." She shook her head.

"Who knows, he might come back." She looked up at him skeptically. "You never know."

"I guess," she reluctantly agreed, hands fiddling with her flowing sleeves. Iris felt a bit silly being so sad about a Pokémon that she couldn't help when her friends had greater problems, but the feeling wouldn't go away.

Ash's brow furrowed and he bit his lip. Finally, he said, "Tell us about him. Hydreigon. There must be more than a temper."

Iris thought about Hydreigon's good moments, which were pretty far in between but were still there. She hadn't realized that her face lit up, but everyone else could see it. She leaned forward a bit and started eagerly talking to Ash about the Pokémon.

Dawn smiled as she watched them and caught Cilan's eye. He grinned back at her and turned his attention towards the front again. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at May, who had a soft smile on her face.

It was good to see her friends as more like the people that she remembered from before.

A sudden burst of static made them all jump, and May rapidly scrambled to grab the walkie-talkie that Clemont managed to get working again. There were only two, but it was good enough to keep the two cars connected. "Sorry, did you say something?"

"Yes," Leaf's voice came through after a moment. "Can we switch? Gary won't stop singing." Said singing could be faintly heard in the background.

Ash snorted so loudly that it woke Pikachu up and sounded like it hurt. Soon, everyone else, even Misty was laughing.

"Negative, Leaf," May replied into it, her voice brimming with mirth. "We're good."

"I hate you all." She must have put the walkie-talkie away since nothing else came through.

Despite her words, they all knew that she was joking, and as they made their way through the tiny, winding roads through the woods, everything felt a little bit lighter.

...

Clemont was very good at tuning people out when he wanted to. It helped sometimes when his father or Bonnie were being a bit too overwhelming, and it also helped with Gary's obnoxious caterwauling and Leaf's loud protests. He appreciated hearing Serena laugh at them, but he was trying to stay on task since he finally had a fully working laptop.

"What are you doing?" He jumped slightly at Serena's curious voice, blushing a bit as she quietly laughed. "Sorry."

"It's okay," he said and cleared his throat. Clemont's brow furrowed slightly. "I've just been trying to keep track of Team Plasma. Benga showed me a few things before we left since we are all on the same side. There's been a lot of chatter lately around them. Ever since they found us."

Serena frowned at that. "What kind of chatter?"

"Not sure on specifics, but considering they seem to be communicating with Kanto, I'm betting one side is trying to gain favour with Giovanni to get another mirage Pokémon to defeat the other faction with." It wasn't just a pure guess, he had been able to decode some things to be able to piece together the theory.

"What better way to do that then to give him a bunch of fugitives, right?" Leaf asked, leaning back in her seat to look at him.

"Pretty much," he agreed. Guilt rushed through Clemont when he realized that he had effectively destroyed the light air around them. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Serena said sternly, placing a hand on his shoulder. "It's good for someone to keep track of things." Her expression shifted. "Hey, do you think that they could have found a way to track us too?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure," Clemont admitted. They had absolutely no time to check the cars over for trackers or anything else, so there was a possibility that someone could find them sooner rather than later.

"So we just gotta get to the Pinwheel forest, find Virizion and the orb, and high-tail it out of here as quickly as possible," Gary spoke up. He glanced over at Leaf. "How close are we?"

She shrugged and grabbed the walkie-talkie again. "Hey guys?"

"What's up?" Dawn's voice came back a moment later.

"How close to the Pinwheel Forest are we?"

There was a pause before she said, "Less than an hour according to Cilan. We're close!"

"Alright." Leaf set the walkie-talkie down and looked at the others in the vehicle. "No point making everyone worried."

Serena frowned a bit at that. Not necessarily because of Leaf's words, but because of the fact that the others may have been doing the same thing to them. No one else seemed to notice, but Dawn sounded awful nervous when she spoke the second time.

...

Dawn was nervous, incredibly so. She kept looking out the back window and the side ones to the point where May had to ask her to stop fidgeting so much, though she was doing the same.

Cilan was able to tell them that they were close to the Pinwheel Forest based on GPS, and Iris recognized the area around them. On top of that, Ash was able to confirm that he could feel the presence of the orb growing stronger.

His eyes snapped open as he stopped concentrating, a shiver of dread running up his spine. "There's someone following us."

"What?" May asked, her fingers gripping at the edge of the seat in front of her. "Who?"

"I don't know, but there's enough of them for me to feel them when I try. They're just beyond the trees." A part of Ash was cursing, because he should have realized it sooner. It was hard to sense things in moving vehicles to begin with, but the orbs truly overwhelmed his senses in general and made it hard to concentrate on anything.

"Maybe they're people traveling like us?" Dawn said hopefully, but it was clear that she didn't believe her own words. No one had to answer that.

"Just tell the others that we're close while we figure something out. Tell them we're less than an hour," Cilan told Dawn. "Just in case these other people are tapping into our frequency."

Dawn took a deep breath and composed herself before activating the walkie-talkie again. "Less than an hour according to Cilan. We're close." She sounded nervous even to herself.

"How many do you think there are, Ash?" Misty asked him, keeping her eyes focused on the road in front of them.

"I don't know." He held Pikachu to his chest anxiously. "More cars than us I think. They're in large groups so it's hard to see how many there are." He could recognize individual auras easily when he knew who he was looking for or there were only a couple people, but nothing like this.

"So more people than we have, and we can assume that they have six Pokémon each," Iris spoke up.

"They've got to be tracking us somehow," Cilan added. "Maybe all the cars were bugged. You said that the Plasma grunts were already at the car lot when you got there, right? That could have been what they were doing, just in case." He paused. "Or those two that got these for us, Hilbert and Hilda, set us up."

"No way," Iris argued while shaking her head. "I don't know them, but I know Benga and I trust him."

"It wasn't her," Ash spoke up almost reluctantly. "She was telling the truth when she spoke."

"Does it matter how they're following us?" May asked, leaning forward a little more. "We know that they are."

"May's right," Misty agreed, her face grim as her fingers gripped the steering wheel painfully tight. "What matters is that we're leading them directly to the shrine."

Silence weighed down on them all at this simple fact that everyone else overlooked.

"We can't let them get to Virizion," Ash choked out, his hands clenched into fists that started to shake. "We can't."

Misty looked in the rearview mirror at the other SUV, her lips pressing into a straight line. Without warning, she suddenly jerked the vehicle towards the edge of the dirt road and stopped. Gary slammed his hand on the horn of the other vehicle while also slamming on the breaks and stopping. Misty ignored him, unbuckling her seatbelt so she could completely turn around to face Ash. "You need to run."

"Huh?" Ash stared at her blankly and Pikachu seemed just as confused.

"They're following us somehow. Maybe someone put something on our clothes earlier, maybe it's in the car. I don't know. What I do know is that if they did, you'd be clean. You got there and got out of the way quickly enough. You have to get the orb," Misty said while grabbing his hand and squeezing it.

"Alone?" Cilan asked, trying not to sound a bit skeptical but was unable to hide it entirely. He knew that almost anyone could have a tracker on them and not realize it, but the thought of Ash going to a shrine alone didn't sit well with him. Not after last time.

"Most of us could be bugged somehow," Iris agreed with Cilan's internal thoughts.

"We can hold them off though," Dawn said, realizing where Misty's idea was going. "We hold them off, Ash gets to the shrine. He gets the orb, asks Giratina for help, comes and gets us, and bam! We're out and Virizion is safe!" Misty pointed at her and nodded.

"I don't..." Ash faltered a bit.

"Come on, let's go tell everyone else what's up," Iris spoke up nudging Cilan and climbing out of the SUV with May and Dawn following behind them, leaving Ash, Misty, and Pikachu. Even Pikachu decided to scamper just outside the open door.

"You need to go, and the more of us that stay here, the better." Misty's voice wavered as she spoke, making Ash realize that she desperately didn't want to send him on his own. Misty had been shielding him, protecting him for so long that it actually made his inner conflict a bit worse, just like how her thinking that she needed to always be strong for him tore her inside until she finally cracked. "You need to do this."

Ash squeezed her hand. He understood, he really did, but he could also feel the weight and pressure crawling back into him. He knew she was right, but he was terrified. He forced himself to look at her, and saw his own fear reflected back at him. She was just as scared as he was, but she was willing to face it.

Even in her weakness, she was so much stronger than him.

"Okay," he choked out.

"You can do it," she reassured him, squeezing his hand again.

"Yeah." Ash took a deep breath. "I can do it. I can." His hand reached to open the door and then looked at her. He opened his mouth to say something else but then turned around and climbed out to join everyone else, Misty following him a moment later.

"So, we're going to take on these stalkers while Ash goes ahead to get the orb?" Leaf asked, resting her hands on her hips.

"Yes," Misty said sternly, not giving anyone any opportunity to argue. She didn't have any form of Aura or psychic abilities, but she just knew that everyone was skeptical about letting Ash go on his own.

"Right," Gary spoke up and took a step forward, clapping his hand onto Ash's shoulder. "You go ahead, we'll be alright. Get the orb, get Giratina, come get us. Got it?"

Ash started to nod but then his face faltered a bit. "I—yeah—I just..."

Before anyone could suggest that someone go with Ash, Pikachu spurred into action. He jumped up at his trainer, hitting two of the Pokéballs on his belt. A burst of light revealed Charizard and Ria, who looked at Ash expectantly before Pikachu caught their attention.

"Pikapi pika chu! Pika cha pika pi pika chu chu pikachu pi pikachu!" Ria shrugged her shoulders and Charizard pondered this for a moment before looking at Ash and nodding.

"Woah, wait, no!" Ash tried to back off but the Pokémon grabbed him around his middle. Pikachu climbed up onto Charizard's back, saluted everyone else, and the Pokémon took off into the sky. Ria ran along the ground, quickly jumping up into the trees to dart from branch to branch, and Charizard followed her, no doubt leading them towards the orb.

"...That's one way to do it," Dawn said, staring up at the Pokémon as it flew away. They all looked around, hearing shouts of approaching people. "Maybe we could just hide?"

"They probably have something up in the air watching for us," Clemont noted, jerking a finger towards the sky. "That's what I'd do at least."

"Maybe we can talk to them," Serena suggested. "I mean, if they value Pokémon as much as they say they do, maybe they won't want to fight?"

"Serena, you're awesome, you really are," Gary said, sounding exhausted, "and your optimism and enthusiasm is really helpful, but why would anything like that go our way?"

She puffed out her cheeks in annoyance but said nothing in response, knowing that he was probably right. She looked behind her at a sudden flash of light, blinking when she saw Leaf surrounded by Venusaur, Espeon, and Spiritomb, all mimicking her serious expression.

"What are you..." Clemont was about to ask but trailed off. He quickly tossed his Pokéballs into the air, releasing Luxray, Chesnaught, and Heliolisk. "Right. They'll probably have jammers."

Everyone else followed suit, though no one released every Pokémon that they had since the clearing they were in wasn't that big. Still, they were a rather intimidating bunch with Misty's Milotic, Corsola and Starmie, May's Blaziken, Altaria, and Glaceon, Dawn's Piplup, Lopunny, and Mamoswine, Gary's Blastoise, Arcanine, and Umbreon, Iris' Fraxure and Emolga, and Cilan's Simisage, Crustle and Stunfisk. Serena's fingers danced over her own Pokéballs before she released Delphox, Sylveon, and Pancham. Though she did have her Vivillon, Florges, and female Meowstic with her, the ones she released were definitely stronger.

Serena had no idea why she felt so nervous. They had been in their fair share of battles so far, but something wasn't sitting right this time around.

Delphox tensed up beside her and turned around in the same moment that Serena heard a clicking behind her. She looked over her shoulder and flinched as she found herself staring down the barrel of a gun. Around them, other Team Plasma grunts also had guns out, trained on both trainers and their Pokémon. A couple of them had jammers with them, preventing them from both releasing

their other Pokémon and calling back the ones that were out.

"Nobody move," one of them said sternly, "and nobody gets hurt."

"Do we take everyone, or just the ones that Team Rocket wants?" someone muttered from the crowd.

"We're not taking anyone to Team Rocket, you idiot," the man in the front of the group said.

"They have Pokémon out too," Iris hissed, noticing some movement in the trees.

"So let's get those guns out of here," Leaf whispered, brown eyes darting from one gun to the next. "Spiritomb, make yourself invisible and start freaking them out. Stay away from the guns." Her Pokémon vanished. "Espeon, Starmie and Delphox are all psychic. We may be able to get them to move the guns out of reach."

"We'll go after the jammers. Not many things can outrun Arcanine."

While they were whispering as subtly as they could, the grunts were arguing with one another. Finally, a short man groaned and said, "A team already went after the one that flew off. Stop worrying about it."

"Ash," Misty muttered, eyes narrowing.

Dawn and May grabbed her arms subtly, so that they wouldn't draw attention towards themselves.

"What the hell?" One of the grunt looked around with alarm. "The hell did you just do that for?" He was glaring at the woman beside him.

"I didn't do anything." She rolled her eyes and looked away, only to jerk back around and yell at him for touching her.

Leaf saw her shirt move, and a smirk rose up on her lips. "Get ready." Espeon tensed up. Serena and Misty both nodded at their Pokémon, who focused on the guns around them.

One of the grunts screamed as they were lifted off of the ground. Everyone whipped around, and that was when the three psychic-types made their move. Pink light surrounded the weapons and they were launched into the air.

"Chesnaught!" Clemont yelled. The large Pokémon shot forward, running towards the grunt that was holding the jammer. A Gurdurr rushed from the shadows, slamming its large block of metal into Chesnaught.

The trees erupted as Pokémon shot out of them, but not a single one of the trainers or their Pokémon were willing to back down.

...

"Ow, Charizard! Okay, I get it! You can stop digging your nails into me!" Ash cried out at his rather annoyed Pokémon. Charizard ignored him, instead focusing his attention on making sure that he was following Ria while Pikachu acted as a lookout on his back.

A small Aura Sphere flew into the air in front of them, a signal from the Lucario that she found the shrine within the thick trees. It took Ash a moment to realize that it was actually a clearing in the middle of the woods, but that made it easier for Charizard to land.

Despite the fact that the fire-type Pokémon was clearly annoyed with his trainer, Charizard still set him down gently. Ash rubbed his side from where the claws had pinched him.

He looked up when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Virizion came out of the trees, and Ash winced as she limped towards them. He moved to meet her half way, not worried at all about her lashing out at him. Instead, he knelt on the ground and pressed his hand to her wounded leg, healing it.

"You have as kind a heart as I remember," Virizion noted. She moved so that she was sitting before him, still looking like the elegant Sword of Justice that she was. "But there is so much pain and despair inside of you."

"I'm sorry," Ash said, looking at the ground in shame. "I ran away from this orb and Cobalion's dead and I just...how can I be the Chosen One? How can I protect you when I can't even protect myself and those closest to me?"

"No one said it would be easy, Ash Ketchum," she responded and nodded at the shrine. "Get the orb."

He hesitated, but then stood up, walking up to the moss-covered shrine and carefully reaching inside of it, pulling out a bright green orb that immediately began glowing when he touched it, just like the others.

Ash was about to say something to Virizion, to apologize again or to remind her that they should have got someone else for the job, but his words didn't make it out of his lips as he froze. Slowly, he put the orb in his pocket, grabbing Greninja, Sceptile, and Garchomp's Pokéballs instead. He didn't even turn around as he released them.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu called out, confused by their trainer's actions.

Ash looked towards the forest, and a moment later, Ria did the same, her fur rising up as she growled.

He moved off of the steps and walked forward, shoulders tense as he waited. A moment later, a group of people burst into the clearing. Ash felt his hair rise at the sight of their guns. Were those the weapons that had killed Cobalion? Or had more specialized ones done that?

"You! Put your—holy shit that's a Virizion!" one of the grunts called out in shock. "Tell the boss we got us a real legendary here!"

The images of the people and Pokémon he couldn't save rushed through Ash's mind, and he found himself moving forward without thinking about it. "You're not touching her!"

Someone laughed. "Even with that group of monsters, you're outnumbered here, kid." The person who spoke took a step back as Garchomp snarled at them.

Ash knew that they were right though. Their Pokémon were already out and they were vastly outnumbered.

A large Bisharp took a step towards them, and Ash yelled, "Sky! Ground!" That was the only prompting Charizard needed to launch into the air and for Garchomp to burrow under the ground.

Ria, Greninja, and Sceptile both launched forward, towards the Pokémon that advanced towards them, while Pikachu moved around their feet, quick to dodge and attack when it was most unexpected.

Ash stayed between the battle and Virizion, desperate not to let another Pokémon die on his watch.

....

"Haxorus!" Iris screamed as her dragon Pokémon was slammed into the ground again. Though they were able to destroy the jammer, they were still vastly outnumbered by the Pokémon around them and it was taking a toll on their own friends.

Iris called her Pokémon back and looked around, wincing as all the eeveelutions were knocked unconscious, along with Starmie, Delphox, and Chesnaught. Little Pancham didn't stand much of a change, forcing Serena to retreat to the back of the group.

They had to find a way to end this before someone else got hurt. Desperation flooded her as she thought about her own Pokémon, but she had already sent out and recalled her Druddigon as well. All of hers were injured or spent.

She had no idea how it was possible that they were losing so badly. Surely they were better trainers? Though Leaf, Gary, Misty, and Clemont seemed to be holding their own fairly well. It wasn't that they were losing, no, they were taking down many of the enemy Pokémon, but they weren't exactly winning either.

Iris screamed as the ground erupted beneath her feet. Fear rushed through her at the Garchomp – definitely not Ash's – that loomed over her with crazed eyes and a vicious snarl. She wasn't normally afraid of Pokémon, but never before had she stared at something that clearly wanted to kill her, in the face.

A roar echoed through the air that made her eyes widen in disbelief. She knew that roar. It was like time stopped as she and several others looked up at the sky.

A couple people screamed when Hydreigon soared over the trees, launching itself at the Garchomp that hovered over Iris. It was quick to use its Dragon Breath on the next Pokémon that came close before rushing at the Plasma Grunts themselves.

It was carnage.

"Shoot it!" Someone yelled in panic. "Kill it before it kills us!"

Once again, time slowed as someone held up the gun. Iris screamed, though she didn't know if it was an actual word or just a nonsensical sound. She practically threw herself at the man holding the gun, and shoved his hand so that the bullet didn't hit the dragon-type, but rather the arm of a nearby Grunt. She struggled with the man over the weapon, until Hydreigon beat him away with his tail.

"You came back," Iris breathed out as she stared at the Pokémon. "You followed us all the way here. I don't...how...no, it doesn't matter. You have to fly away before they hurt you too. Please."

"Iris!" Cilan yelled in alarm. "Get out of there!"

She looked around to realize that she was being surrounded, and looked at the Pokémon again. "Please, you need to fly so that they don't kill you. Please."

Hydreigon stared at her before growling negatively, all three heads shaking.

Iris looked around her desperately before an idea popped into her mind. It was risky, but it really didn't seem like the dragon-type was about to move willingly.

Hesitantly, she placed a hand on the Pokémon's smooth scales, trailing her hand along as she carefully approached its back. Hydreigon looked around at her, but didn't stop her, so she reached out and pulled herself up onto the Pokémon's back.

"Fly," Iris said to him, and the Pokémon roared again. She braced herself as he launched himself up into the sky. The chilled wind rushed by her, but she couldn't feel the cold. Instead, she felt elation, like her heart was pounding in her throat.

She had never flown on one of her dragons like this before.

With her hair trailing behind her, Iris looked out over the treetops and spotted a twister of fire fly through the air. She narrowed her eyes and said, "We need to help Ash."

Hydreigon roared in response and started heading towards where they had seen the fire.

...

"Charizard!" Ash cried out in alarm as the Pokémon slammed into the ground. Ash practically launched himself towards his friend, wincing at the sight of his clearly broken wing that also had a gunshot wound in it. "Look at me, buddy."

Charizard grimaced but looked at his trainer and nodded his head. He wasn't in immediate danger of dying.

Ash recalled him, and seeing his other Pokémon being pushed to their limits, he panicked, recalling them as well.

"Giving up?" One of the men said, smirking. "It's best to leave Virizion with us. Lord Ghetsis will be quite pleased."

"No," Ria snarled, startling them as she pushed herself up, having avoided going back into her Pokéball. Her hand reached up to the sparkly bow that she wore by her ear, brushing against the stone as she looked at Ash.

He stared at her for a moment before slowly nodding, and running his fingers against his keystone as it started to glow.

Light surrounded Ria as she shifted and changed into her Mega form. She opened her eyes and stared at their attackers before throwing herself at them. In that form, she was fast. She was strong. She felt like she could do anything.

Though, as an attack cut her arm, she reminded herself that she couldn't as she watched Ash wince and grab his arm in the same spot.

Ash was proud of the fact that he could prompt his Pokémon to use Mega Evolution, but Ria's was something else all together. What happened to her in that form sort of happened to him too.

Ria came face to face with a Glalie, that quickly transformed into its Mega Evolution. She didn't care who the trainer was, it didn't matter as she fought back.

Wincing as she was slammed into the ground, Ria looked over at Ash as he grasped his middle and fell to his knees. She had to stay focused so that he wouldn't get hurt like that.

An Aura Sphere appeared in her hand, brighter and larger than any she could normally make, and she slammed it into the Glalie before twisting in the air and kicking the Heatmor that rushed at her.

She flipped and landed on the ground neatly, ready to lunge forward again, when a roar echoed through the air.

Ash looked up and barely had time to flinch back as Hydreigon shot down to them tossing aside one of the Sawk that had been inching forward.

"Ash!" Iris called out from Hydreigon's back. "Are you okay?"

He blinked up at her, definitely confused. "I think so?"

She turned her attention to the grunts. "Let's wreck them, Hydreigon! We need to protect Virizion!"

Ria was quick to go on the offensive again, Pikachu following suit and electrocuting anything that came towards them.

Ash winced as he felt a powerful pain in his sternum as Ria was hit. He looked up at his Pokémon, relieved when she got back to her feet at first, but grimacing again as she was thrown backwards, her head hitting the ground roughly.

Pain ripped through Ash's head, and everything began to feel dizzy. He heard Iris calling his name, but that was the last thing he remembered as he lost consciousness.

...

Doctor Yung stared at the screens before him, excitement crossing his features. He looked up from the monitors to the massive room beyond a protective window.

Below, a giant Pokémon with long, white fur and a golden wheel laid peacefully, an odd glow surrounding it.

"It's almost time," Yung said to no one in particular, though his glee couldn't be contained.

In the room, Arceus opened its eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Our Deepest Fear

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Storms had plagued them over the last week. Thick clouds with raging winds and rain that chilled to the bone. Some people whispered that it was still the after-effects of Groudon and Kyogre's death (which made a lot of sense), but others theorized that it may have been another legendary Pokémon wreaking havoc on them so that they could no longer organize against Team Rocket. That also made a lot of sense.

So when the clouds broke, revealing the blue sky and the warm sun, Max was quick to slink out of the safety of the Dragon's Den to be able to actually breathe.

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and looked towards the white clouds and the blinding sun above him. It felt nice to be outside and not coddled for once. A scowl passed over his face as he thought about how much the adults shielded him, babied him even. When May was his age they had gone head to head with legendary Pokémon. Hell, he himself had been a part of those adventures. He could understand keeping other younger trainers safe, but he had been through terrible situations before. He was smart, and he could handle it.

"If you keep scowling, your face will stay like that."

Max jumped a bit and looked over his shoulder to see Bonnie approaching, Dedenne resting on the top of her head. She plunked herself ungracefully at his side and he asked, "Does your dad know you're out here."

"Nope." She shrugged her shoulder. "I was going stir-crazy inside. Besides, they'll know we're out here. There are cameras everywhere." She pointed over her shoulder at a little round thing he had assumed was just a decoration. When he voiced this, Bonnie laughed. "Clemont made things like that before." Her smile faded away a bit. "I miss him."

"I'm sure he's okay," Max reassured her. "He's with Ash."

"I'm not sure whether that makes it better or worse," Bonnie admitted, though she sounded almost

amused. "I love Ash too, he's like my second big brother, but he gets in trouble all the time."

"Sounds about right," Max agreed. He looked back towards the sky and frowned. "You really never ran into any legendary Pokémon with him?"

"Well..." Bonnie trailed off. "There were a couple times that he would go off on his own for periods of time and later on we heard rumours about legendary Pokémon being seen. Then there was Squishy."

"Squishy?"

She looked wistfully at the sky. "Yeah. He was a form of Zygarde. He was my friend for a while but he had to leave one day. I never knew what happened, but Ash left again around that point in time. That was also when Team Flare tried something and the league stopped them." Bonnie looked at him and tilted her head. "Do you think...?"

"Ash was involved? Definitely." Max nodded his head. "He's the Chosen One, which is more like a mediator between legendary Pokémon and the rest of the world. It's his job to protect them from us, from each other, and to protect us from them." He tapped his finger on the ground as he watched Dedenne scurry off of Bonnie's head to sniff at a nearby flower. "The thing is, people get hurt, we've been hurt before. He probably didn't want to get you involved if he could help it."

"I get that, it just seems stupid," Bonnie said bluntly.

"Stupid?" It made a lot of sense to Max.

"Yeah. I get wanting to keep us safe, but everyone knows that Ash works better in a team than completely on his own." Bonnie held her legs to her chest. "I wish we could help him now."

"Me too," Max agreed. "I hate feeling useless."

"Hey, Max?"

"Hmm?"

"What happens if we lose?"

His head snapped around as he looked at Bonnie, who seemed oddly small as she looked at the ground. Sure, she was physically a small girl, but he already knew her personality was bigger than life. She was so bubbly, optimistic and confident. Really though, she had a legitimate question.

"I guess, everything changes," Max admitted. "They'll probably take our Pokémon, or severely limit our usage of them. Blocking the regions from one another again makes sense so we can't fight together like we're starting to now. Everyone in positions of power will be replaced with people loyal to Team Rocket." He shook his head. "All the while, the environment will get worse. The Mirage Pokémon won't be able to replace the real legendaries. The world will get worse and eventually..."

"We all die," Bonnie said. Max expected her to sound sad or downtrodden, and was taken aback by just how angry she sounded. "That's stupid too! It's a bad plan! How can that be their plan? It doesn't make sense!" She stomped her foot on the ground.

"Maybe they have an endgame we don't know about," Max theorized. Actually, he was pretty sure that wasn't just a theory. He was sure that Team Rocket had some kind of endgame that they were unaware of. Nothing made sense otherwise.

"Den!" They both jumped as Dedenne cried out in alarm and ran back to them, stopping and staring at the bushes defensively.

"Dedenne?" Bonnie asked hesitantly, getting up to her feet. Max mimicked her motions, hands resting on his Mightyena's Pokéball.

Dedenne's fur stood on end as its eyes glared at the bushes. The leaves rustled, and both children took a step backwards.

Then a pink, furry Pokémon popped out and stared at them with her big, blue eyes. "Mew?"

"Mew?" Max repeated in shock.

"That's a Mew?" Bonnie asked, eyes wide with disbelief as she took a step forward. "It's so cute!"

"Mew!" The Pokémon cheered as it did a little loop in the air and smiled at Bonnie.

"Wait a sec!" Max cried out. "It could be a mirage."

Mew looked insulted by his words and shook her head. She looped around them and then flew away, stopping to look back over her shoulder and waving to them.

"You want us to follow you?" Bonnie asked, picking up Dedenne.

"Mew!" Mew nodded her head.

"Wait!" Max yelled again, grabbing Bonnie's arm before she could move closer to the Pokémon. "It might be dangerous. Maybe we should get someone else?"

Bonnie stared at him, blue eyes searching and curious, before her lips straightened into a firm line and her eyes blazed with a fierce determination. "If you're scared, you can stay here. I'm going to see what she wants." She pulled her arm away from him and started to trail after the legendary Pokémon.

Max bit his lip before releasing his Mightyena. "Stay close." He trailed after Bonnie, his Pokémon following him.

Bonnie kept her eyes on Mew as they hurried towards the woods, ignoring Max's warning cries. She wasn't sure how far they ran, or where they were going, but she wasn't afraid.

Though she did almost run into Mew when the Pokémon finally stopped in front of a giant boulder.

Bonnie observed the rock a Max came to a panting stop beside her. "What's important about this?"

"It's what's under that's important." Both children jumped at the childish, feminine voice that ran through their minds.

"Did you just-?" Bonnie started but Max interrupted her.

"Of course, you of any Pokémon would know telepathy," he said with a sigh. Bonnie shot him a glare that he didn't notice.

Mew giggled a bit and touched the boulder. Both of the children gaped in shock as it melted away into nothingness, revealing a set of stairs going down into the earth.

"There," Mew said happily. "Now you have a better way in than those other tunnels. Good luck."

A pink glow surrounded the little Pokémon, and she vanished.

Bonnie and Max both stared at the tunnel in front of them before exchanging shocked looks.

"We need to show everyone else."

...

Clemont stared at the strange, rippling sky of the Distortion World. It was strange how it was almost comforting. When they were in the Distortion World, despite the fact that the stories of it were so negative, they were safe.

It wasn't a negative place, he was quickly realizing. It was just a place that was different from theirs that was created to balance it, and poor Giratina, who had legends saying that it was a vicious monster, was one of the nicest legendary Pokémon Clemont ever met.

They owed everything to Giratina.

"You know, I've been thinking," Serena spoke up, "in Kalos, the league just recently took down Team Flare." She ran her fingers gently against Giratina's strangely textured skin. "So they might not be a problem there at all. They couldn't regroup so quickly, right? And we know Team Rocket didn't really have a huge footing there. I imagine Diantha took them out. Team Flare though..."

"That depends on how they were taken down," Leaf replied. "If the leader's still there..."

"Lysander. He was the leader," Ash said, startling everyone. He looked down at Pikachu unsurely as they all looked at him.

Misty leaned on his shoulder, and said, "Tell them."

Ash looked towards Serena and Clemont. "Diantha told me to keep quiet about the whole thing. I was there when it was Alain."

"Alain?" Clemont raised an eyebrow. "The way you talked about him at the league was like you had no idea who he was."

Ash shrugged. "I didn't really know him and the whole thing was a secret anyway." Pikachu nodded his head in agreement.

"Misty knew." Serena pointed out, a light bit of accusation in his voice. Ash just shrugged, not looking the least bit guilty for that.

"Pikachupi cha pi Pikapi," Pikachu said dryly.

Ash blinked and looked down at his Pokémon with a betrayed expression. "Pikachu!"

"Pi," Pikachu shrugged his shoulders.

"What did he say?" Cilan asked, leaning forward to look at them from where he was sitting, trying to keep Iris from running up to Giratina's head and ask a hundred questions again.

"Nothing." Ash glared at Pikachu who just smirked back.

Giratina suddenly started moving upwards, startling them all. Dawn leaned forward a bit and said, "We must be there!"

"Time doesn't move the same here, so it's possible," Clemont agreed.

They all held on as Giratina released an attack that ripped open a swirling portal above them. Ash closed his eyes in an attempt to block out the sensation of going from being surrounded by Aura to just feeling the surface of it in their world. It was always a bit of a shock to his system.

The first thing that hit them all was just how warm it was. Unlike Sinnoh and Unova, Kalos was not chilled or covered in snow. In fact, it looked exactly how Ash remembered it.

The area they were in was a sandy beach, with the sun high in the cloudless sky and a gentle breeze to fight off the heat so it wasn't scorching like it had been in Hoenn.

"Oh wow," Iris mumbled as she pulled off her jacket. "It's so much nicer here." She clearly approved from her tone of voice.

While everyone else started pulling off their own jackets, Giratina vanished, but that came as no surprise. It was safer for the Pokémon to only surface every once in a while.

Establishing the fact that they had to give each other privacy when they were changing was something that they very quickly did, especially as their group got bigger and bigger.

Clemont stretched out his arms and rolled up his sleeves before digging through his bag to pull out his laptop. "Alright, let's see where we are."

"You know...we've come full circle, haven't we?" Serena asked, looking around at Clemont and Ash. "This is where it all began for us."

"It's only been a couple months," Clemont noted. "It feels a lot longer than that. Right, Ash?"

Ash wasn't paying attention to anyone else, not even Pikachu as he took a few steps forward and looked around him. He made a face, clearly perplexed by something. He closed his eyes to focus, but opened them quickly again.

"Ash?" May called out to him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"It feels different here," he explained. "Like the air's not as heavy here." His eyes darted left and right. "There's one close to here. It's a little faint but close enough."

"Giratina probably brought us as close as he could get to one," Gary said. "And maybe the other part has to do with the fact that they may not have Mirage Pokémon here." He raised a hand above his eyes so he could stare at the cliffs that bordered the beach. "Where are we?"

"On the beach just outside of Ambrette Town," Clemont answered as he finally got a GPS match. "We could always try going there first to see if we can get any supplies. If Team Rocket or any other team doesn't have backing here, we may be in the clear to use normal transportation for once."

"You mean no more grand theft auto," Leaf asked him, bemused. He just smiled at her.

"Is there any place significant around here?" Cilan wondered, tapping his lip with his finger. "Where a shrine might be?"

"The Glittering Cave is pretty close," Clemont said, standing up and putting his stuff away. "If I had to take a bet, I'd say that's a good place to start."

No one had any sort of objections. Then again, this was the first time in a while they felt warm and surprisingly safe, so there wasn't really much to object to.

They skirted around Ambrette Town the first time they drew near, deciding to head towards the Glittering Cave first.

"When we come back, Iris and Cilan could go into the town to see if it's safe," Leaf suggested. "They're the least likely to be on any sort of shit-list at this point."

"It'd be nice if we could sleep in the Pokémon center," May said wistfully, clasping her hands in front of her as they started to walk along the side of the cliffs, looking for a place to get up without having to use their few escape ropes to try and scale the walls.

"A bed would be nice," Serena agreed with her, sighing. "An actual shower too."

"Come on now, our portable cleaning wipes are fantastic," Cilan noted, sounding rather optimistic but they all knew he was being sarcastic.

"We could probably get up that way, if it'll take us to where we need to go," Iris noted as she stared up a steep path.

"That's still really steep," Gary said as he looked up.

Clemont groaned as he followed her gaze. "I wish I could say no but yeah, that'll take us there." He glanced over at Ash. "What do you think?"

He didn't say anything, unable to really tell yet. Though it was easier to feel things out with his Aura compared to other places, it was impossible to be that specific until they got closer. Realizing that Clemont was waiting for a reply, he shrugged.

Pikachu looked at the cliff and huffed, jumping up on his trainer's shoulder.

"Why don't we just use a flying Pokémon?" Dawn asked. She wrung her hands together. "It's just...that's still really steep. If someone slips they could get really hurt."

"The Pokémon are all way too tired, we haven't been able to take them to a Pokémon center in a while and I don't know about you, but I'm out of any type of potions," Misty pointed out.

"I don't have the right berries to make natural cures either," Iris added.

Ash stared up at the cliffside, pursing his lips slightly. He shifted a bit, eyes darting over the different places that could act hand or foot holes. He looked around at Gary and said, "Do you have an escape rope? Just one?"

Gary eyed him briefly before looking up at the slope. "Think you can get up there?" A very small part of him was worried too, because though Ash didn't seem outwardly as depressed, there was still the chance that he could just decide to not catch himself if he slipped. Gary wished he didn't have to think that way, but he'd rather be prepared to help his friend.

Almost like Ash knew what he was thinking, he said, "Climbing has always been easy for me."

Gary nodded and pulled out the longest escape rope they had. He passed Ash the rope, and Pikachu jumped up onto Gary's shoulder instead.

Without waiting, Ash slung the rope so it was draped over his shoulder and jumped, grabbing onto

the lowest jutting rock. From there, he found it easy.

Ash had always loved to climb. He had always been good at it, able to scale almost anything with ease to the point where other kids would dare him to do the most ridiculous stunts he could. He'd gotten in trouble a couple times for ending up on rooftops or the top of a tall basketball net.

As he quickly scaled up the cliffside with just a very slight slope with absolutely no safety precautions on his part (though if he fell, he could always just stop his fall with his Aura so it wasn't like he was worried), he felt almost free. It was a strange feeling, and maybe it had to do with the fact that there was no negative Aura pressing down on him or even just the nice weather. He didn't know. What he did know was that he felt like he could just keep climbing for hours and be completely happy.

The cliffs weren't that tall though, and he was soon hauling himself to the top. He looked around before finding a large rock that he wrapped the rope around, securing it so that it wouldn't slip, tugging on it. He backed towards the cliff while holding onto it and tossed the rope down to his waiting friends. "Use it to climb up. It's not hard."

"Says the Mankey," Gary replied while shaking his head. Pikachu jumped ahead of him, easily scaling up the rope and jumping onto level ground next to his trainer.

Gary grabbed the rope once he was sure Pikachu was up but then turned to Leaf. "You wanna go first?" He glanced at her black dress and wiggled his eyebrows ridiculously.

She snorted. "Joke's on you, I'm wearing shorts under this." She grabbed the rope, tugged on it, and then started scaling the side. They could just barely walk up the ledge, but without the rope, it would be nearly impossible for the people who couldn't climb. When Leaf got to the top, Ash reached out to her. She grabbed his hand and he yanked up. When Gary came up behind her, they both helped him but then she smacked him.

"What's that for?" Gary asked, holding his arm where it sort of (not really) stung. Leaf raised an eyebrow at him and motioned to her dress.

Dawn and Serena were the last ones to scale up, Dawn going first at Serena's insistence. It wasn't that they didn't trust Clemont (the last one left aside from them) not to take advantage to look up their skirts, but they agreed to let him go first anyway.

"So where to now that we're up here?" May asked them stretching out her arms.

Clemont groaned from where he was gasping on the ground. "We have to walk that way. There are a lot of steep falls so be careful. Some people prefer to take Pokémon over the terrain, it can be rough, but we can get there on our own by tonight."

"Let's keep going then, the sooner we get there, the sooner we can check out Ambrette Town to see if we can actually stay in a Pokémon Center for once," Dawn insisted, shifting on her feet, thinking about having a nice shower for once.

As they made their way around the rocky formations, they could see Ambrette Town in the distance.

"You know, I really wanted to come to Ambrette Town," Misty said wistfully. Ash blinked at her, surprised. "I wanted to ask if we could come after the tournament. See the beach and the aquarium." She looked back at the town that led to the ocean.

Ash's expression softened. He shouldn't have been surprised that visiting this town had been a part

of her original plans when she came to Kalos to see the tournament. Of course, everything was thrown out the window after that.

He was a bit startled when Misty suddenly grabbed his hand. He looked at her and Misty beamed at him. "Maybe we can come back after all this is over."

After it was all over? That was a nice sentiment. Ash nodded his head and that seemed to appease the girl, who muttered something to Pikachu as the Pokémon climbed from his shoulder over to hers.

He could feel it. Everyone was starting to feel a little more hope. Maybe it was because Kalos seemed okay - it felt okay to him - and they were so close to getting all the orbs. They were in the home stretch now and everything seemed to be looking up.

Ash wasn't normally a pessimistic person. If anything, he was overly optimistic to the point where people called him a dreamer. At the moment though, he got the sinking feeling that they were in the eye of the storm and things were going to go really bad, really soon.

He glanced at Misty and Pikachu, and then over his shoulder at Ambrette Town, before focusing on the walk ahead of him.

...

"Why is it so mad?!"

"Maybe because you kicked a rock at its face?!"

"That wasn't my fault!"

"Just go!"

There were a couple expectations about how they'd find the Glittering Cave. On one hand, most of them expected to reach the entrance and maybe take a break before calmly continuing onwards. Then there were the skeptical ones that just knew Team Flare was going to show up even though they were recently defeated.

No one expected May to accidentally kick a rock at a Heliolisk and have an entire herd of them give chase in response. Oh, their Pokémon could have handled them with ease if they were in top shape, but most of them were still too exhausted or injured. So, instead, they ran.

The herd of angry Pokémon stopped chasing them when they ran into the entrance of the cave, and after a moment of running into the darkness and realizing that they weren't being pursued, they all stopped running.

Dawn was the first one to burst into a fit of giggles. She tried to hide it, but was unable to do so. May, though still flustered at accidentally causing their earlier mishap, followed suit. Soon, each and every one of them were in hysterics.

"Holy hell," Gary choked out as he managed to settle his laughter. He looked around as Misty walked by him, raising an eyebrow at the awestruck look on her face. When he turned to see what she was looking at, his breath left him. He wasn't one to call things beautiful, but with the light filtering in from the front of the cave and bouncing off hundreds of colourful gemstones lodged into the walls, sending rainbows sprawling across the rocky floor, he had to admit that the Glittering Cave was beautiful.

"Look at it," Serena gushed as she ran her hands over a red stone.

"It's amazing this place hasn't been completely mined," Leaf said, a hesitant honesty to her voice.

"It's illegal," Clemont answered. "This is considered a protected site so no one's allowed to mine it. Sure, I imagine some people come and take a couple here and there but they wouldn't be able to sell them. They're a very distinct composition."

"Well, it gets really dark very quickly," Iris noted. "We'll probably need our flashlights really soon."

Ash leaned close to the wall, at one crystal specifically. He raised an eyebrow and glanced at Pikachu, who tilted his head in response. The boy reached forward and pressed his finger against it, watching a bluish-green glow spread out from it.

"Hey," Ash called out to the others, who were about to start digging for their flashlights. "Save those. Watch this." He pressed his hand against the wall and focused, reaching out to the very thin current of Aura that he knew was passing through the walls, and pushed the energy. Small crystals began glowing, spreading out down the cavern, illuminating it in a faint light.

"Woah," Iris breathed out. "That's amazing."

"Is this Aura?" Cilan asked curiously.

"Yeah, just like the Tree of Beginning," May answered. She then made a face. "As long as we don't run into giant blobs that try to eat us again. Once was enough."

There was clearly a story behind that, but no one who knew it bothered to share as they started walking forward.

"Is it here, Ash?" Clemont asked, walking beside his friend.

"Yeah, it's here," he answered. Though it was a bit hard to see beyond the veins of Aura he brought closer to the surface of the cave walls, and beyond the power emitting from the orbs in his backpack, he could still feel it.

The Glittering Cave was easily one of the most beautiful places that they had visited yet. The shining and glowing stones were enough to make most of them forget that they were, in fact, walking farther down into an eerily quiet cave system.

It was only when Ash stopped beside a pitch black opening that veered off from the main tunnel that the spell was broken. He stared at it, his unsure expression lit up from the aquamarine lights.

"Why is nothing glowing down there?" Misty asked curiously.

There might not be any of these stones there," Ash said with a shrug, picking one out of the wall and dropping it into her hand. Misty smiled at it slightly, running her fingers over the familiar, smooth surface. She had one of these stones already that he gave her years ago. She kept it in her room at home so she would know when he was nearby. Her smile immediately vanished when Ash added, "The orb's definitely down there though."

"Of course it is." Leaf sighed and brought out her flashlight. "Guess we do need these after all."

"Most of these side entrances are usually roped off," Clemont noted, looking left and right. "I don't see anything set up for that though."

"It might not have existed until we got here," Gary pointed out. "Now come on, the sooner we get the orb, the sooner we can see if we get a bed to sleep in or if we're swiping more cars." He nudged Ash. "Lead the way since you can sense where we need to go."

Ash stared at the dark tunnel, a wave of unease rushing through him. He slowly walked forward, not bothering to pull out a flashlight. He could see the faint pulse of Aura through the earth, and though it wasn't nearly as vibrant as living creatures, it was enough for him to know when he was about to trip on something.

One step after the other. Just keep going. The power of the orb in question started settling onto Ash, and he felt that familiar, heavy weight returning. It was the feeling that made him want to run for the hills, because it was all too much and he was just a teenager who had no clue what he was doing, no matter what anyone else said he was supposed to be.

"Why don't you stop thinking about yourself for a change?"

Ash came to a stop at Misty's hostile voice and turned around. He stared at her, confusion dancing across his eyes.

"Misty?"

"It's always been about you." She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Ash Ketchum is going to be a Pokémon master - anyone else be damned. Look at your Pokémon. You don't even care about them."

She pointed to his side and he followed her finger until his eyes met with an angry, beat up Pikachu. Charizard was just beyond him, wings broken and eyes hostile. Sceptile was limping, his leg jutting out awkwardly. Garchomp was growling and backing away, holding his arms close to his middle to protect a wound. Greninja's side was bloody and bruised. Ria's hackles were raised and she looked ready to strike back at him.

"That's not true," Ash muttered, feeling the weight press down on his chest. "I didn't...I would never..." His Pokémon really were hurt and he was unable to take them to a Pokémon Center because he was stupid about letting the enemies see their faces.

"Ash, honey..."

"Mom?" He whirled around again, shocked and confused to see his mother standing in front of him. Try as he might, he couldn't stop the tears from welling up in his eyes. "Mom! You're okay!" The last he heard, someone had attacked her, and that thought made him feel sick. Not just because of the act itself, but because he was able to outwardly shrug that aside while Ritchie's death crushed him so soundly. "I thought you were..."

"Oh, I am dead." Dark red splotches started to stain her shirt as her skin grew paler. "Why couldn't you save me? Wasn't I important to you?"

"Yes! You are!" Ash cried out and tried to run forward to heal her wounds, but no matter how much he ran, he couldn't seem to reach her. "Mom!"

"No, I'm not." She looked at him accusingly. "You're just like him. Just like your father. You leave everyone behind without another thought, not really caring. You're so selfish." Delia frowned as she headed towards the entrance of the cave, silhouetted by an intense orange light. "That's why you're going to lose. You're going to kill all of us."

"Mom!" Ash yelled and lurched forward one last time, but she vanished. He stumbled out of the

cave, and immediately froze. Everything around him was destroyed or burning. He could see the legendary Pokémon; he could see his friends; he could see his family; he could even see his enemies. Everyone was dead.

He fell to his knees and wanted to vomit, but there was nothing to throw up. He had failed.

...

Misty wouldn't admit it, but she wasn't a huge fan of the dark. Her sisters told her so many ghost stories growing up that it made her a little suspicious and reluctant to be surrounded by complete darkness. Leaf's flashlight didn't even seem to be doing much good anymore.

A wailing caused Misty to freeze, and she looked around in the darkness, confusion passing across her features. "Do you guys hear that?" She didn't wait for an answer. "It sounds like...a baby." She took a few steps forward and then realized that no one was following her. "Guys?"

How she had gotten separated from them so quickly, Misty didn't know. What she did know was that she could still hear a child crying. No, not a child, it was much younger, more like a newborn infant.

Frowning, Misty ran towards the sound, shoving aside her own fear. Who would leave a child down in a dark, dank cave?

She rounded the corner, and froze at what she was seeing. There was a blue-haired woman cradling a small child. Her throat felt like it was closing up when the woman looked up, her brown eyes meeting Misty's green ones. "Violet?"

"Misty." She held the swaddled child close to her and smiled. "Look at her. Isn't she beautiful?"

"She really is," Daisy agreed as she stepped out of nowhere. "Such a precious child."

"So sweet," Lily agreed as she appeared at Violet's other side.

Misty made to walk towards them, but ended up walking straight into something solid. She put up her hands, pressing against a glass wall. She looked at her sisters with confusion.

Then water started rushing in from the ceiling.

"No!" Misty screamed and slammed her hand against the glass. Her sisters were screaming and scrambling to look for a way out as the water rapidly rose, but there was no way out.

"Misty!" Violet yelled. "Misty you have to save her! Please!"

"You're the strong one, don't abandon us!"

"Save us!"

Misty sobbed as she slammed her hand again and again on the glass wall until her fists became bloody and bruised. Realization hit her hard, she was not going to be able to break the wall.

She turned around, closing her eyes and pressing her hands over her ears so that she wouldn't hear her sisters' screams or the wails of the baby.

"Why didn't you try to save us?"

Misty's eyes snapped open and she screamed at the grotesque versions of her sisters in front of her.

"Why did you abandon us?"

"I-"

"Misty, why? Why did you do this to us?"

"I didn't!"

"You did. This is your fault. You left us."

Misty shook her head and backed up until her back was pressed against the glass that she dared not look back at. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her hands over her ears to block out the screams and the wailing of a young baby.

Then the glass shattered and the water rushed in.

...

Somehow Gary must have gotten turned around, that was really the only explanation he could think of. One minute, he was inside of the pitch black cavern lit up by Leaf's flashlight, the next he was standing in the backyard of his grandfather's lab. Or, perhaps the cave had been a dream, a cruel and twisted nightmare.

He heard voices coming from beyond the lab, following it curiously. He got to the front yard and blinked with surprise, staring at a man with spiked, light brown hair. He was talking to his grandfather.

"Gramps?" Gary called out, and both men turned to look at him. His breath caught in his throat when he saw the man's blue eyes, his mind reeling back to his youth to the last time he had seen them. "Dad?"

John Oak, better known as Blue in the history books, scowled at his son, an expression that Gary had seen many times when looking in the mirror. Everyone always told him that he looked just like his father, even if his colouring was more similar to his mother. "What are you doing here?"

"Me?"

"Yes you? Shouldn't you be studying or something?" Blue eyed him skeptically. "You're not good for much else. Pity really, that the only thing I left in the world was you." He turned around and started walking away.

"Dad! Wait!" Gary was about to run after him, but his grandfather caught his arm. "We have to stop him."

"Don't you want to be alone?"

"What?" Gary was completely taken back by the man's question.

Professor Oak stared at him with knowing blue eyes. "Don't you remember, that's what you told them. To leave you alone." He paused. "I suppose I should do that too."

"Wait!" It was too late, his grandfather was gone too.

Slowly, Gary's outstretched arm fell. He stared at nothingness for a moment before it shifted into a busy hallway.

"Loser."

"Monster."

"Orphan."

"Pathetic."

"Such a show off."

"A complete jerk."

"Good for nothing."

Those words and others mixed together into a horrific harmony in Gary's mind. Over and over he could hear it, getting louder and louder as the glares became more intense.

A hand rested on his shoulder and he shoved it off violently. "Shut up and leave me alone!" His breath caught in his throat again when he met Ash's eyes.

"Oh, okay," he took a couple steps back, brown eyes flitting with disappointment. "I'll leave you alone." He turned around and walked into another room.

"Wait! Ash! I didn't mean it!" Gary launched forward, sudden dread passing through him. He didn't want to be alone. He didn't want to have to face everything on his own. It was part of the reason why he went with Ash, Leaf, and the others in the first place.

At first, the room he ran into was pitch black, but then the lights flickered on and Gary almost threw up. On the floor were his friends, dead and mangled in ways that shouldn't have been possible.

"You were useless to save them, but it's for the best," Blue said, appearing on the other side of the room. "Now you're finally alone like you always wanted."

Gary fell to his knees and stared at his friends in horror. They were all dead, because he was useless and didn't have the power to save them.

...

"What the hell?" Leaf asked, twisting around with confusion. Hadn't she been in the Glittering Cave a moment ago? She didn't remember entering a room surrounded by mirrors. Perhaps she just veered off in the darkness.

She stared at her reflection and frowned. She was pretty sure that she had a flashlight only moments before.

Shrugging that thought off, Leaf approached the mirror closest to her and placed her hand on the cool surface, staring at the spot where her white glove seemed to touch its reflection. She blinked, and it suddenly looked a little different.

Looking up, Leaf took a step back, the reflection doing the same despite being different. The teenage girl in the reflection wore a black dress like her, but hers was a turtleneck. Along with it, she simply had white gloves, white boots, and earrings - so similar yet so different compared to Leaf's choice of teals and pinks so deep that they looked almost red.

This woman's hair flowed in just a slightly different way from her own, the colour a darker, more

reddish variant that highlighted her green eyes. Differences aside - including the fact that Leaf looked down at her slightly - their facial features were almost identical. The shape of their eyes, the bridge of their noses, even their narrow jaws.

Leaf knew who this woman was. "Mom?"

The girl in the mirror, a younger version of Amanda Green, put a hand to her chin, staring at her critically. "Huh, you're just like me, aren't you?"

Leaf took a step back from the mirror again, and eerily enough the reflection of her mother took a step forward. Leaf shook her head. "No, I'm not."

"You're trying to be a leader when you're just a follower. Trying to be intelligent when you're average. Trying to be a fighter when you're weak. I see through you." She took another step forward. "It's easier to be like me, isn't it? To let things pass you by or to wait until it's too late. To be indecisive until it doesn't matter. Of course, you're devious like me. You don't mind throwing morals to the wind. You would walk over the laws and your friends for something that you claim you want but maybe you really don't. You're not that decisive."

"Shut up!" Leaf snarled at her. "None of that's true! It doesn't even make sense! Will I walk over everyone or be nothing?"

"Because you're like me, both." Green smiled. "You'll destroy things in your wake and get nothing from it."

"No! I would never-."

"Only a few years ago, did you not want to be a researcher? Specializing in poison-types and plants? You tricked that other potential assistant for Professor Oak into going in the wrong direction. How about poor Joey? You agreed to escort him to Johto but then left him as soon as possible. Selfish child, he wasn't in a good frame of mind to be left alone."

"Shut up!" Leaf yelled at her, hands clenching into fists. "I didn't just leave him!"

"Oh, but you did. How about your journey now? You want glory and recognition, but you'll never get it when so many others outshine you. Such a jealous child."

"I'm not."

"You want to trust that boy, to see if you could love him though so you're so very confused, selfishly not caring about what type of person you become attached to. You reeled him in and now you don't know if you wanted to. Pity." Amanda reached forward, her gloved hand pressing against the glass that saved them. "He may leave you with a child. Leave you with something that will leech off of you until there's nothing left."

"Shut up!" Leaf screeched, pale brown eyes watering with unshed tears. "Shut your mouth! I am not you! I'm not the thief you were, the one who would have killed people to get what she thought she needed. I'm not the one who's going to abandon my friends because something doesn't go my way!" She closed her eyes briefly, letting the tears fall before opening them. "I would rather never have children than abandon them or treat them like you did me. I don't play with people! I don't leave them."

"Are you sure?"

The mirrors started to shift and Leaf was pitched forward. She stumbled on the uneven ground until

she managed to balance herself, not understanding what the strange thing she was standing on was. She blinked and looked down.

She found herself staring at a pale, clearly-deceased and starting to rot, adult version of her mother. Under her, in a pile that seemed to be never-ending were her friends and other trainers and Pokémon she met in the past.

Nausea hit her hard, and she jerked back when her mother's corpse moved her head, looking directly up at Leaf. "I'm so proud of you. You got to the top just like I would have."

It took her a moment to understand the meaning behind the woman's words, but when they hit her, they hit hard.

Leaf fell to her knees on a blank, black floor, and buried her face in her hands to muffle her sobs.

...

May couldn't see a foot in front of her face. She had no idea where Leaf's light went but she knew that it was gone. Turning around to ask Dawn what happened, May froze, unable to see anything behind her at all. She listened, but couldn't hear anyone either.

Mentally, she cursed herself. She must have turned in another direction without even realizing it. She swung her green pack off her shoulder and dug through it until she found her flashlight. She was about to zip up her bag when she heard movement behind her.

Shoulders tensed, May zipped the bag and moved it on her shoulders. She slowly stood up and looked around, shining her flashlight in front of her.

Her scream echoed around her as she stumbled backwards, falling onto her rear as the flashlight rolled across the floor, somehow lighting up the entire cavern. Her eyes stared into a very familiar pair of green ones, but they seemed so blank and lifeless. Tears welled up in her eyes as she took in his bloody outfit, the gashes across his cheek and arms, green hair tinted and stuck together with thick splotches of red. One of his arms was clearly dislocated, one hand was in a position it shouldn't have been and there was blood caked over his pants.

"May," he said in a lifeless, garbled voice.

"Drew," she choked out, hands shaking violently as her tears fell.

"Why couldn't you save me?"

"I'm sorry," May sobbed. "I'm sorry! I tried to hold on! I tried! But you-"

"You blame the dead?"

"No!" Maybe a part of her still did. That little piece that screamed that it wasn't her fault but was still looking for someone to blame. If he hadn't been so self-sacrificing. No, it wasn't his fault. She knew who was to blame. "It was Team Rocket! And those rogues from Aqua and Magma! It wasn't you! It wasn't me!" It took her a long time to be able to say that and she wasn't about to let go.

The twisted, bloody version of Drew turned and started to stumble away. May sprang to her feet and ran after him, surprised at how quickly he moved when one of his legs shouldn't have been sticking out the way it was. She had no idea why she was following him, she didn't want to see him like that. It made bile rise up into her throat, a burning sensation running through her chest and body. It made her sick, angry, sad, scared, and horrified; yet, it also made her a bit hopeful. He was

talking. Surely she could save him despite his injuries and his dead eyes?

May stumbled around a corner, and screamed again as she fell to the floor. Her parents were sprawled out, halfway in the darkness. Bodies twisted and mangled in ways worse than Drew's was. She jerked away, retching onto the cave floor.

"M-May."

Her head snapped up, eyes searching wildly around the cave for the origin of the voice. Her heart beat wildly in her chest as panic flooded through her. She knew that voice.

Then she saw him.

"Max!" May screamed, jumping to her feet and running to her brother's side. He was injured like the rest, a bloody mess, but he was still alive.

His eyes glistened in pain and fear as he reached a bloody hand up to her. "Please, help."

"I'm here Max, I'm here." She knelt beside him, unsure of where to start with his injuries. She reached for her bag, but it wasn't there anymore even though she was sure that it had been on her back a moment ago.

"May..."

"I'll find something! I promise! I'll get help!"

"Please don't leave me alone again." Tears started streaking down Max's cheeks. "I was alone and I didn't know where you were. Please don't go."

May didn't know what to do. She hated to admit it, but her brother was so much smarter than she was when it came to theoretical information and ideas. If he wasn't coming up with a solution, there probably wasn't one.

She shifted so that she was sitting and pulled him to her so that he was in her lap. She held him close, not caring if her shirt or jeans were coated in blood. "I'm here. I won't go anywhere. I'm here."

"Thank you, May," he mumbled, leaning on her. His glasses were gone, she realized, but she could see a cut where the glass must have broken against his skin. "May?"

"Yeah?"

"Could you sing to me? The song mom used to."

May looked up to where the bodies of her parents were, but they were gone. She and Max were alone. "Yeah. I can do that." She closed her eyes, trying to keep in her tears as she started to hum a familiar tune. Their mother used to sing to them when they were younger, and it was the same song that they used to help Jirachi go back to sleep years before.

"No. Not the melody. The words."

She ran her fingers along his cheek, struggling to force the lump in her throat away. Closing her eyes, May took a deep breath and started singing the words that she knew by heart since she was a young child. She rocked her younger brother the entire time, not realizing that her own tears were falling down onto him.

"Slip softly to that place, where secret thoughts run free, and there come face to face with who you want to be..."

...

Dawn had no idea how a deep, dark cave in Kalos led to a large contest hall in Sinnoh, but she wasn't about to complain. Looking around at the high ceiling and the dark stained-glass windows, she recognized it as the Alamos Town contest hall specifically.

She walked by her reflection, realizing that she was wearing her favourite pink dress for contests, similar to what she wore when she was younger, but more suited to her taste and age. It wasn't strange that she was in a hall with this outfit, but what was strange was that there was no one else there.

Jumping when she heard footsteps approaching her, Dawn looked over her shoulder, a smile appearing on her face. "Mom!"

Johanna, dressed in an outfit suited for contests as well, smiled as she walked towards her. Dawn wanted to cry, to apologize for running away with Ash and her friends instead of going back to her, but all her words caught in her throat when her mother ran a hand across her chest tenderly.

"Mom. I-"

"You ruined my life," Johanna said, never once losing her smile.

"Mom?" Dawn tried to take a step back, but the woman's hand slid to her chin and held on tightly. "Ow! That hurts!"

Johanna squeezed harder. "You know, I only had to retire because of you. I was still so young. I had the world - even your father. Oh he was handsome, everything I could have wanted."

"Mom!" Dawn tried to jerk back, managing to get away from the hand grabbing her chin. Her mother grabbed onto her arm instead. "Let go of me! What's wrong with you?"

"You." Finally, the woman's face went cloudy. "You don't look anything like him. Every bit like me. You act like him though. I think I knew from the beginning." She sighed. "He would have stayed if it wasn't for you."

Dawn had heard vague stories of her father in the past. She knew that he probably didn't even know she existed. She didn't understand it when she was younger, but now she did. Her parents had either dated for a brief time or were together only once, Dawn didn't know which. Her mother had never said anything like this to her before though.

"Why would I want to know someone like her? Call her mine?" A deep voice boomed out. Dawn twisted around, watching a tall figure, features hidden by the shadows, walk towards them. Though she couldn't see his eyes, she felt like they were searing into her.

"Are you...my father?"

The shadow figure flinched away. "I wouldn't want to be associated with something so...weak and useless."

"I'm not-"

"You're the cheerleader, right? The annoying voice on the sideline that chants 'no need to worry'"

while everyone else fights like that will help? A stuck up child who thinks she knows how the world works but is truly ignorant and useless. I knew you wouldn't be anything special. Why do you think I never came back? Or reached out? I knew who you were." She heard him scoff. "I wish I didn't. Your so-called friends feel the same way."

Dawn felt like her throat was closing at his words. She had never needed her father, she was always happy with just her mother, but hearing his words made her feel sick to her stomach.

A shadow reached out from behind her to place a hand on her shoulder. She spun around, slapping the arm away and screaming, "Don't touch me!"

To her horror, once her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she found herself staring at Ash. At first, he seemed stunned, but then a cross expression passed over his face. "Fine, be the stuck up, know it all we all know you are." He turned to walk away from her.

"Wait! I didn't mean-I thought you were-"

"We don't need you." Those words pierced through the chipped shield that her mother and father had worn down. She held out her hand, but Ash walked into the shadows and she was alone in the darkness.

...

A shiver went up Iris' spine when she heard a familiar roar. Her hands scrambled to find a specific Pokéball, but none of them were there. She heard the roar again, followed by a scream that pierced through her.

Iris ran as quickly as she could, jumping over jutting rocks and quickly scaling up steep slopes. It didn't matter if she got some cuts, bumps, or bruises.

A startled yelp escaped her lips as Iris suddenly slid off something slick. She slammed onto the rocky floor with a loud thump and a groan. Pushing through the pain, she shoved herself into a sitting position, realizing a moment later that her hand was resting in a thick, warm liquid. Her breath caught in her throat and she didn't want to look down, already knowing what it was.

Still, she forced herself to look down. Iris had to force herself to not vomit as she jolted up, pretending that the floor and her clothes weren't coated in a thick layer of blood and that there weren't pieces - no - chunks of people left behind.

She wanted to cry, but kept it in. Iris was a tough girl after all. She could keep going forward.

As she turned the corner, Iris wished that she hadn't. A painful, heart breaking scream echoed throughout the cavern, and it took Iris a moment to realize that it was her scream. She ran forward, to the Pokémon scattered on the ground - her Pokémon - and stared at the bite marks in them. Hydreigon laid not far from them, taken down by something else.

"No," Iris muttered, kneeling beside her Pokémon. "Please, no."

"Iris..." A voice croaked out. Her head snapped up and she stared at Cilan in horror, brown eyes scanning over the deep wounds as he reached towards her. She reached out, but couldn't get to her feet no matter how much she willed it.

"Cilan!" Iris cried out. "Stay with me! It's-it's adventure time! Right? You gotta get your eyes open!" Her heart beat painfully in her chest, like it was preparing to rip itself out with every gasping breath he took.

"I thought...you could... be a...Dragon...Master," he managed to choke out in between deep gasps that bubbled out of his throat. "I thought...you were...strong enough. That I could...always...count on you."

"You can! I promise!" He closed his eyes. "No! Cilan! Open your eyes! Please! Cilan!" He didn't respond to her screams, no matter how loud and desperate they became.

"He's gone Iris, like we are." A woman knelt down on one side of her, a man on the other. Iris looked from one to the other, tears blurring her vision as Cilan and her Pokémon all faded away. It took her a moment to recognize them, not because she knew them, but because she saw little bits and pieces of her own features in them.

Her parents.

"I'm so disappointed in you," her father spoke up sadly.

Her mother cast her eyes to the ground and sighed. "We had such high hopes for you. You couldn't save a single Pokémon. You grew up learning about dragons. You should have been good enough."

"You couldn't save strangers, your Pokémon, or your friends from an ordinary creature. How do you think you'll help save the world?" Her father added.

They didn't sound mad. Iris could have taken that. What right did they truly have to judge her? The disappointment took all of the fight out of her. It hit the remnants of her cracked and fragile heart, smashing it to smithereens.

She pitched forward so that she was kneeling, her hands slamming into the stone ground. They were right. Of course they were. She was nothing.

Iris' agonizing scream echoed in the empty caves.

...

The gym was empty, and Cilan knew then and there. Quirky, strange, a bit random, and slightly immature at times, were things that had been associated with him and his brothers to varying degrees, but they were not irresponsible. They wouldn't have run off, leaving others behind to suffer in any form. There was only one solution.

His brothers were dead.

Cilan looked at the ruined restaurant before going to the battlefield. He wished that he hadn't.

There were no costumes, hats, or silly dramatics that could bring a positive spin on what he saw. There was nothing but destruction. No person or Pokémon - barring a few that they didn't own - could have survived this.

"Cilan!"

His heart leapt to his throat as he heard Chili call out to him. He turned and there they were, his brothers. They were different though, with their flawless skin that quite literally glowed. It was dim and comforting, and so very warm.

Though not nearly presented with as much flair as Cilan would have liked.

"Come on, Cilan." Cress held out his hand. "Come with us. No one needs you here."

"That's right. Why go anywhere with anyone else when you can be with us," Chili added.

"We were born into this world together, we should leave it together too."

Cilan could see the logic in their words. It made sense to him. He would never be complete without his brothers, no matter how much he smiled at his friends and insisted that he'd be okay.

Two people appeared behind his brothers, and Cilan gasped. His parents smiled at him silently.

"We can all be together again," the redhead insisted. "All five of us. Just come with us. No one needs you. Only us."

Cilan nodded his head and was about to move towards them when a different voice called his name. He looked over his shoulder, his green eyes meeting Iris' bright brown ones. "Iris? What are you doing here?"

"Don't go with them," she pleaded, clasping her hands together in front of her as her eyes watered. "Come back with me. To the others."

He stared at her, his heart thumping painfully in his chest. "Iris...my family needs me."

"We do too!" she cried out. "Please! Come with me!"

"Do you really need me?" he asked skeptically, arching an eyebrow at her. "Really? How?"

Iris opened her mouth to speak, a pained expression passes her features when she couldn't say anything. Pain rippled through Cilan as she looked at the floor.

She really didn't need him.

He looked back towards his brothers, taking in their smiles and the hands that they were holding out.

Cilan glanced at Iris only once before reaching for his brothers.

...

"Big brother!"

Bonnie's scream broke Clemont out of his musing. He had been thinking about the tunnels, where they could lead, and what possible legendary Pokémon could be guarding them. The terrified cry was enough to immediately catch his attention. He didn't wait for anyone else, he just started running towards where it came from.

"Bonnie!" Clemont cried out as he ran, not knowing where he was going. He tripped and stumbled over small stones and grooves as she screamed again. It wasn't a word this time, just a horrible, terrifying scream.

He stumbled over his feet, toppling end over end until he slapped into a solid object with a groan. Clemont squeezed his eyes together and groaned, before stretching out his legs to make sure that nothing was too injured or broken. Satisfied, he pushed himself up, ignoring the small tweaks of pain.

He stared at the door, but didn't hesitate to push it open. That was where Bonnie's scream had come from.

The bright light stunned his retinas that were used to the darkness, temporarily blinding him. Clemont threw his arms to block the sun as he squinted, trying to get used to it. When he could see again without burning his eyes, he stopped and stared.

He'd been in this hospital room before. Many times.

"Clemont," a quiet voice whispered. Though it was so timid, it still broke through the silence harsh enough to startle him.

Clemont whipped around, and froze. His blue eyes met a pair identical to his, belonging to a woman with stringy, blonde hair that was far too thin to be healthy. Her cheeks were gaunt, her eyes sunken, and her skin so pale that it was almost translucent.

They had never shown Bonnie the pictures of their mother just before she died, and he was glad for this very reason. He would never forget her face, but at least his sister could picture her when she was healthy and happy, not like this.

"Mom." Clemont took a step forward, but then froze when he realized that his mother was cradling a bundle of blankets, a stock of blonde hair sticking out the top, though the rest of the person was completely covered.

It wasn't the size of a baby. It was the size of a child. It was the size of Bonnie.

"You promised me," his mother said, her soft voice choking on tears. "You promised me that you'd always protect her."

Clemont remembered holding his mother's hand, dressed in protective gloves and a face mask.

"You left her alone," his mother continued when he didn't respond, staring down at the bundle. "My sweet Bonnie, you left her all alone to run off."

"I thought-I thought she was safe," Clemont choked out. First his mother, now his sister. They were both gone and he was powerless to save either of them. "She was with dad! She was safe!"

"You should have stayed with her," Meyer spoke up, appearing beside his wife and staring down at her and Bonnie. There were tears in his brown eyes. "She wanted to be with you. To go with you. She always took care of you more than you took care of her." He closed his eyes. "Why couldn't you fix this?"

"I thought...I couldn't..." Clemont fell down, staring at his family as they blurred behind his tears.

He thought he could keep them safe by helping keep the world safe.

He was wrong.

...

"Ugh!" Serena sat up in her bed, arms flailing to get her mother's Fletchling away. The Pokémon always woke her up by pecking her head. It was infuriating.

She pouted as she got up and looked in the mirror, her pout vanishing as she stared at her reflection with confusion. Looking down, she grasped her long hair. Hadn't she cut it?

"Serena! Breakfast is getting cold!" She jumped at her mother's voice, but hurried down the stairs. Cutting her hair must have been a dream. She was proud of her long locks that were so different

from her mother's.

"There you are," Grace said as she put out three plates piled with food. "Dig in. We're going to practice today."

"Practice?"

Grace sighed. "Yes. Racing. Remember?"

"I..." Serena's brow furrowed. She didn't like Rhyhorn racing.

"Come on, Serena-bo-bean-ah, you're food's going to get cold!" A cheerful, male voice said. She glanced up as her father slid into the third chair. She felt the blood rush from her face as she stared at the man, his blonde hair a shade lighter than her own. Her shocked expression must have been obvious, because he looked up at her with concern. "Are you alright, sweetie?"

"Oh, she probably just changed her mind about racing again," Grace interjected dramatically. "You know how she is."

"I suppose," he agreed, and reached for the remote, about to turn the channel from where it was showing Kalos Queen Aria's latest performance.

"Wait! I like performances!"

"Do you?" That seemed to surprise both her parents.

"Well...yeah...I think so." She frowned. Serena knew that she loved performances, she just didn't know why. "I want to be the Kalos Queen, so I do need to participate in them."

Laughter echoed through the room, and the world outside the windows went dark.

"Don't be silly," Grace said, "you could never do something like that. Traveling, dedicating yourself to something so long-term? You could never do that. You've always been a sample-and-go girl."

"It's true," her father agreed. "It's safe really. You've never been able to stick to a single thing. How could anyone trust you? You'd lose interest in training your Pokémon in a week."

Anger and hurt rose up in her. "That's not true! I can do it!"

"No you can't, sweetheart," her mother sighed. "Don't delude yourself, thinking you're strong. You're not. You're nothing really."

That was right, wasn't it? She was nothing. Tears welled up in Serena's eyes at the thought. She wasn't strong enough to help anyone.

"I can't save anyone," she breathed out, her hands curling into fists, her fingernails digging into her palms. "I'm too weak. I can't save them. I can't save you." She closed her eyes as the pain of the truth hit her hard.

"Why would you have to save me, Bo-bean-ah?" Her father coughed after he spoke, and her eyes snapped open. His cheeks suddenly looked much more gaunt, his skin paler, his hair thinner.

"I couldn't...because you were sick," Serena breathed out, her face scrunched up with confusion. "You were really sick like so many people and you...you died. I never got to say goodbye. And then-then mom took me to Kanto where I met..." Serena trailed off.

She stood up and stared around her house, at the pictures of the three of them. "Mom took me to Kanto because I kept asking where you were, when you were coming back. She had friends there and she couldn't handle it. She enrolled me in summer camp." She looked at her father. "You died."

"Serena..."

"You're not real," she breathed out, taking a step away from him and her mother. The pictures began to fade. "You died. I never understood but...the performances...my hair..."

"That sounds like a horrible nightmare, Honey. That's all it was though. Just a nightmare."

Losing her father had not been a nightmare. Ash. Bonnie. Clemont. They had not been a dream. Misty. Leaf. Gary. May. Dawn. Cilan. Iris.

They were not a dream.

But this was.

"You're not real!" Her hair was short again, under her white hat, and she was wearing her tiered red skirt and her black shirt again. She stared at her father and mother. "This is a dream. You're not real."

They smiled. She woke up.

Serena stared at the ceiling above her, lit faintly from a pale pink glow coming from some of the crystals around her, as well as Leaf's discarded flashlight. She breathed in and out twice before suddenly sitting up.

All of her friends laid around her, faces twisted in different ways as they faced some sort of horror in their minds.

"Pika!"

Her head snapped over, and she stared at Pikachu, who looked back at her with alarm.

"Pikachu! What happened?"

"Pika pi pika cha pikachu pika pika pikachu pi pika cha ka!" Pikachu gestured wildly to the glowing stones, down the dark corridor beyond them, and at everyone else.

Serena didn't entirely understand what he was saying. She couldn't translate directly. What she assumed he was saying was that the crystals had somehow put them to sleep in nightmares of some form.

Her mouth went dry when Serena realized that she was the only one awake, and that something must have done this to them on purpose.

She took a deep breath and pushed herself to her feet. She looked back at Pikachu and said, "You stay and protect them. I'll go find what did this."

"Pika!" the Pokémon protested in alarm, though he had yet to leave his trainer's side.

"I'll be okay." Pokémon didn't seem to be affected like people were. She was about to grab Delphox's Pokéball, but remembered the scuffle with Team Plasma. Delphox needed a Pokémon center, not more trouble.

She rummaged through her bag for her own flashlight, choosing to leave Leaf's, just in case someone else woke up. She grabbed three Pokéballs and called out, "Vivillon, Florges, Meowstic!" The three Pokémon appeared before her, all completely alert. They weren't trained for battles anymore than her other Pokémon, but they could still fight well enough. "We need to see what's down this hall and doing this to everyone. Be ready for anything, it's just us." All three Pokémon nodded, and they started down the hall together.

Serena looked back to wave at a worried Pikachu before they went around the corner.

There were more glowing pink orbs, and she got a sense of déjà vu for some reason that she couldn't pinpoint. This just reminded her that she had to be on her guard.

The tunnel opened up to a large cavern that had to be a couple stories both up and down. She came out on a thick ledge with an old, rather questionable staircase going down it. She looked over her shoulder at her Pokémon and whispered, "Get down." Even Vivillon pressed herself to the floor as Serena turned off her flashlight and they all crept forward.

The lower part of the cavern was lit up by the same pink glow as the cave was, but it was so much brighter. Serena's breath caught in her throat when she saw the shrine below them. Though the orb wasn't lit up - it wouldn't be without Ash - she knew it had to be down there.

"It must have been some kind of defense," she whispered before glancing at Florges. "Can fairy-types do that?" It sounded way more like something a psychic-type Pokémon would do. Florges didn't respond, but her smug expression was answer enough.

Serena thought about their options. The easiest thing to do would be for her to go down there and grab the orb herself and then give it to Ash. Actually, sending Vivillon down there would have been even easier. The problem was that they didn't know if Ash needed to be the one to physically remove the orb from the shrine (or next to a crushed shrine, in some cases). No one would want to wait 24 hours underground to see if it would vanish back, and they could be pretty far away in 24 hours if they actually managed to leave.

Serena groaned as she scooted back a bit, only standing up when she was sure that nothing below them would be able to see her. She motioned for her Pokémon to follow her back down the tunnel, and she turned on her flashlight again.

She got back to her friends, all of them still unconscious, though some were muttering under their breath and twitching. Serena knelt beside Clemont and shook him. "Wake up. Clemont!"

The blond boy groaned and curled into himself more, a tear sliding down his cheek. Serena backed off quickly, and tried to wake Misty with the same results. If she tried to wake them, it sent them into worse nightmares.

Her face went pale. "Oh no. Pikachu!" The Pokémon jumped. "How much have you tried to wake Ash? I think it makes it worse!" The terror and shame on the Pokémon's face answered her question.

Serena moved beside Ash and pushed his cap off of his sweaty head. He flinched under her touch and muttered, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Ash. We're all here and we're okay." Relatively speaking, anyway. Serena was surprised when her words actually seemed to calm him. "Ash? Your mom loves you and believes in you. Misty loves you and believes in you. We all do. We're all here with you. You're not alone, okay? I'm sorry we made you feel like you were." She closed her eyes briefly before they snapped open,

determination colouring them. "You've carried us this far in one way or another and lately, others have been trying to help, but not really me. It's my turn to carry you."

Serena tried to yank him up, only to be met by firm resistance. Ash Ketchum was many things, but light was not one of them. "Ugh. Seriously. Guys, help me with this." None of these Pokémon were physically strong, not even Florges, but it was better than nothing. She got them to lean Ash onto her back where she hiked him up in an awkward piggy back. Vivillon fluttered behind him, keeping a bit of his weight off of her.

"Meowstic," the Pokémon muttered, staring at her with a bit of shame in her eyes. Serena knew it was because this Meowstic struggled a lot with telekinesis-based abilities. Otherwise Serena would have got the Pokémon to float him there.

"It's okay," Serena smiled at her Pokémon. "I want you to stay in front and be ready to fight, and carry the flashlight please. Florges, you help her, okay?" The two Pokémon nodded and walked ahead of them. "Pikachu, I know you're worried, but I need you to stay with everyone else, okay? We'll keep Ash safe."

Pikachu's ears fell, but he nodded. "Chu."

Serena took a deep breath. One step at a time was the key. Ash was not a light boy, and given that he was just dead weight at the moment, it was worse than normal. Her arms and legs were shaking, and Serena was sure that if it wasn't for Vivillon, she would have dropped him not even halfway there. How she planned on getting him down the steps, she didn't know. She just wanted to get him to the cavern first.

"Holy hell you're heavy," she muttered, trying to distract herself. "No more pizza pockets for you! How does Misty deal with you being on top of her?" Serena paused that thought process, though she physically kept trekking forward. A part of her was stunned that she'd dare utter a thing.

She snorted in the most unladylike way. "I've been hanging out with Misty, Gary, and Leaf too much. At least everyone else is sweet. Sweet...but not weak. We're not weak. None of us. Not May. Not Dawn. Not Clemont. Not you. Not me. We're strong. We just need to get up and keep moving forward." She gritted her teeth. "You taught me that, you know?" He didn't answer, but that was probably for the best right now.

They were almost to the entrance of the cavern. "You still got him too, Vivi?"

"Vi!" Vivillon cried out affirmatively.

Serena sighed in relief when they reached the ledge, and struggled to set Ash down. She had no idea how they were going to get him down the steps yet, but her muscles and back begged her for a break.

She was just glad that she didn't have to carry Ash when he was eating properly and completely healthy. That wouldn't be any kind of fun.

Suddenly, Meowstic's fur stood on end and the Pokémon hissed angrily, dropping the flashlight that quickly flickered out. Florges and Vivillon were quickly in defensive stances as well.

Serena looked over her shoulder at a looming silhouette. She froze, staring at the creature with wide eyes. Ash shifted beside him, and her eyes darted back to him.

She couldn't let anything happen to him now.

"Florges! Vivillon! Meowstic! It's time to fight!"

They all lunged forward at the mysterious creature while Serena hovered in front of Ash's prone form.

...

Lance stood at the edge of the staircase that descended down under the ground, patiently waiting for word back from the team that was sent down to explore it.

Beside him, Tracey leaned over the maps that they brought, looking over both the known underground ones from as far back as they could find.

"Either Mew just made this one now, or it's ancient," Tracey finally concluded. "There's not even a hint of a tunnel in any of these maps. Not even a slightly strange detail."

"So while they may know about the ones up around Pewter City, they'd have no clue about this tunnel, is that correct?" Lance asked him, staring at it thoughtfully.

"Yes," Tracey agreed with a nod. He tapped his pen nervously against the map before adding, "It makes me nervous though."

"What does?" The Kanto-Johto Champion was barely paying attention to the young man behind him.

"Why Mew chose now to show up." That made Lance pause and glance back at him. "Why not earlier on? Why just this?" Tracey shook his head. "Unless maybe Mew, or Arceus, thought that we needed the help."

"That is unsettling," Lance agreed. "Though it also might mean that maybe they have a plan to beat the Mirage Pokémon."

The radio suddenly sprang to life with static. Everyone turned their attention to it, as if they'd be able to see the team that had gone under the ground. Unfortunately, it was a rather old machine, but they didn't want to risk Team Rocket finding out about the tunnel. One of the Elders in the Dragon's Den owned that two-way radio, there was no way Team Rocket would be using something similar, and if they were, finding the exact frequency they were using would be a miracle.

"Dragonite?" Brock's voice came through the radio.

"Go ahead, Steelix."

"Sir, we didn't get all the way there, but it's a pretty clear route. Definitely made by Pokémon. There's no sign of any human presence. We need to go further, but judging from the GPS, I think it goes right into Kanto."

"Alright, regroup back here. We'll get a team together for a full excursion to see where it comes out."

"Copy that."

Lance took a deep breath and looked at the sky. If the tunnel truly went into Kanto, and Team Rocket didn't know about it, it might have been the answer that they'd been looking for.

...

"Ash!" Serena cried out to her friend, shaking him though there was the chance that her interacting with him could make his nightmare worse. "Ash! You need to wake up!" Whatever her Pokémon were fighting was strong, and none of them were able to land a real hit. It was like the attacks were just passing through it.

Vivillon crashed into the wall of the cavern, falling to the ground. Serena screamed, scrambling to grab her Pokéball, and call the bug-type back. Desperation fuelled her and she turned around to face Ash again, raising her hand up, and slapping him as hard as she could across the face.

The sound seemed to almost echo through the cavern, but somehow it did the trick. His bright brown eyes snapped open and he looked around wildly. For a moment, Serena was afraid that he was still lost in his nightmare, but he blinked up at her and his brow furrowed with confusion.

Serena saw movement outside of her peripheral vision, and looked over as another shadow loomed over them. Somehow, she knew that it was staring at Ash, not her. This was proven true as it reached out for him.

"No!" Serena jumped up, throwing her arms out so that she was shielding Ash. She wasn't about to let some shadow creature crush him when they were so close to getting all the orbs. "I don't know what freak Pokémon you are, but I'm not letting you hurt him!"

He clearly had no idea what was going on, but his eyes focused on the figure, and he just looked more confused than anything again. "It's not...it's more than one Pokémon."

Serena looked at him for a moment before his words sunk in. More than one Pokémon together to make themselves look like a bigger Pokémon made sense. It explained the strange movements and why none of Florges' or Meowstic's attacks landed. They just kept moving out of the way.

"Florges! Meowstic! Grab just a part of it!" The two Pokémon rushed forward, grabbing the hand of the creature and yanking back. It easily separated from the rest, and the three Pokémon fell to the ground and into the faint light.

Ash blinked. Serena stared. "It's a...Carbink?"

The little Carbink stared up at her with wide eyes before squeaking and getting up, rushing back into the groups that froze. Florges and Meowstic stood protectively in front of Serena and Ash, staring back.

Hearing Ash shift behind her, Serena looked over her shoulder and saw him struggling to stand up. She twisted and held out a hand to him, which he gratefully grabbed, and she helped him to his feet, holding his arm as he stumbled a bit.

He let go of her, and held his hand out. She winced from the brightness as an Aura Sphere appeared above his hand. The pale blue light made the bags under his eyes seem even darker, and his skin looked much paler than normal.

The Carbink all scrambled back away from the light, staring at them briefly before huddling in a circle and whispering. A couple of them quickly scuttled off.

Serena had no idea what was going on, but they seemed to be safe for the moment. She looked at Ash and asked, "Do you feel okay?"

His brow furrowed and he glanced her way. "Where's everyone else?"

"Pikachu's watching over them. We were all trapped in nightmares." Ash flinched at that, clearly hoping that he was the only one that suffered through whatever terrors he had seen in his head.

"How did you-."

"I slapped you really, really hard."

Ash just stared at her oddly as his hand reached up to the cheek that was burning and stinging, now that he actually focused on it. Not that he blamed her. "How did you wake up?"

"I figured out it wasn't real," Serena answered, smiling slightly at his impressed look. Her eyes widened and she grabbed his arm again. "Ash. The orb's right down there! You go!"

"What? I'm not-" He stopped talking as the Carbink came back, but they weren't alone this time. A larger Pokémon appeared, a faint pink glow surrounding her.

Serena inhaled sharply as she recognized the Pokémon. "Diancie?"

When she and Clemont mentioned not having met any legendary Pokémon before, that wasn't entirely true. They had met Diancie briefly - having taken the Pokémon shopping of all things - but she quickly disappeared, as had Ash. It was only a brief meeting, but it was a memorable one.

"Hello, Serena. Ash." The Pokémon floated over to them, smiling warmly. "I'm sorry the Carbink attacked you. They didn't realize who you were until they could see you better. They were just protecting me and the orb until you got here." She clapped her hands together. "Come on." She led the way towards the stairs.

Serena felt like a load had been lifted off of her shoulders now that Ash was awake and Diancie was leading them peacefully towards the orb. She quickly recalled Florges and Meowstic, holding the Pokéballs close to her chest and whispering thanks to them. She didn't like that feeling of pressure at all, being so responsible for everyone else.

The Carbink made sure that neither of them slipped down the worn, steep staircase. The bottom of the cavern was covered with crystals that put the outer tunnels to shame, all glittering and sparkling from the dim light of Ash's Aura Sphere.

"What happened to us? Our friends?" Serena asked.

"Oh no, you still have more friends that are asleep?" Diancie seemed horrified. "That's really old magic that flows through the pink crystals in the walls. It uses the small Aura currents that run through caves. Everyone has Aura in them, so it responded to that."

"You didn't do it?" Ash asked warily as he approached the shrine.

"No!" Diancie seemed horrified. "It was one of the Diancie before me - back when we were a bit different. We change with the world too, just not as quickly. You can stop the flow and that should wake them up."

"Are you telling me that I slapped him hard enough to disrupt the flow of Aura around him?" Serena asked, and Diancie just shrugged. Serena jumped when Ash's Aura Sphere vanished, but her eyes didn't have to adjust to the darkness for long, as the orb lit up with a pale pink glow.

Ash stared at it with a rather sullen expression before glancing at Serena. She nodded her head and said, "We should go wake everyone else up. Get them out of their nightmares. Diancie, are you coming up with us?"

"Oh, no." The Pokémon shook her head. "Giratina said to call when we were ready. I talk to her sometimes through the crystals and mirrors! Oh! And I was supposed to tell you to look for the dragon next!" She waved at the Carbink. "Could you help them up the stairs?"

Before they could go more than a step, Diancie suddenly reached out and grabbed Ash's arm. "Ash. I know it's hard, and it's scary. But you can do it. There was never any doubt in my mind. We all believe in you, and we're all rooting for you!"

Ash stared at Diancie, slowly nodding his head. She let go of his arm, and backed away. They took this as their cue to move, walking back up the stairs carefully.

Serena breathed a sigh of relief. It was hard to believe that it was over just like that. No, not completely over, Serena realized when they came upon their friends again.

Pikachu cried out in relief, and Ash rushed forward, skidding to his knees beside Misty. The girl groaned as he picked her up, cradling her upper-body in his arms. Ash took a deep breath and pressed the hand that wasn't cradling her to the ground. A faint light pulsed across the floor, and the crystals turned from pink to pale blue.

Serena knelt beside Clemont, watching as his face twisted with agony before his eyes snapped open. He stared at Serena, before gasping in shock and sitting up, looking around the tunnel wildly.

"I don't know what you saw, Clemont, but it wasn't real," Serena said soothingly, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I swear."

Slowly, he nodded his head, still shaken. "What happened?"

"Diancie," she answered. "It was a trap to protect the orb."

"Did you get it?" he asked her.

Serena looked back to where Ash was. A smile rose up on her lips as she watched him press his forehead against Misty's, talking to the teary-eyed girl. Both of them were clearly distressed, but it was also painfully obvious that they were leaning on one another for support.

"Ash got it," she said after watching the couple for a moment. "We can leave."

"It wasn't me," Ash spoke up, leaning his head on top of Misty's in a comforting gesture for both of them. "Serena managed to wake up on her own. She beat her own nightmare. I-she somehow got me down to the cavern...how did you do that anyway?"

Serena flushed. "I carried you."

They all stared at her and Misty raised an eyebrow. "You carried him? No offense, but I know for a fact that he's heavy." She could still lift him though, something she was quite proud about. Serena wasn't exactly known for her physical strength though.

Serena shrugged and stood. "I know it's sudden, but I think we should get out of here. Get some real light."

"Yes please," Dawn squeaked out and May nodded her head in agreement.

Bags on their shoulders, and several flashlights out, everyone crowded much closer together to walk this time. No one dared to speak, but from the way flashlights kept shining behind them and down every nook and cranny that they passed, everyone was frightened.

The Glittering Cave was a beautiful place, Serena thought. It was ironic that the beauty hid a darkness beneath it that few would discover. No, perhaps irony wasn't the word she was looking for.

It was more appropriate than anything else.

...

They waited on the outskirts of Ambrette Town, patiently staying out of sight until Iris and Cilan returned. The two silently went ahead to make sure that it was safe for the rest of them to head into the town.

May, for one, really hoped that they could go. She didn't want to be outdoors at night, and the sun was rapidly falling as it was.

Her blue eyes turned from one person to the next. Misty and Ash were leaning on one another, talking so quietly that she couldn't hear what they were saying. Leaf had her arms crossed, and looked rather cranky while Gary was uncharacteristically quiet. Serena was talking to Clemont quietly, frowns on both of their faces, and Dawn sat not too far away, holding her knees to her chest.

Misty held Pikachu close to her as Ash looked around. He didn't seem alarmed, so May was sure that there was no danger heading their way. A sigh of relief escaped her when she realized that Iris and Cilan were walking back towards them.

"It's safe," Cilan said, and everyone let out a sigh of relief. "Sorry we took so long, but we booked two rooms at the Pokémon center. It's pretty busy. That's only eight beds though, so either we mix up the rooms, or the girls get one and have to share, while the boys get the other."

"May and I can share," Dawn suggested. "We're both small." Relief passed over May's face. She didn't want to be alone.

Misty shifted closer to Ash, a clear, silent motion that she was sharing with him one way or another.

"Mixing it is," Cilan nodded his head. "Let's get going."

They led the way through the narrow streets, by the houses and the shops. The Pokémon Center looked like a big, beautiful beacon in the darkening sky as they approached it.

The sight of Nurse Joy smiling at them as Cilan led them towards their rooms was so comforting, that May was sure she was going to cry.

The second they got into their rooms, and dropped their bags to the floors, is when May's eyes actually began to tear up. They were in a real room, with real beds. For now, they were safe and could sleep securely.

Except, she had no desire to sleep at all, not after what she had seen. May was positive that almost everyone else felt the same, no matter how exhausted they were.

Showers proved to be an absolute blissful excuse to stay away. They basically took over the boys' and girls' shower rooms, but it was so late that no one else could complain about how long every single one of them took.

Iris, Cilan, Serena, and Clemont went into the other room, leaving Gary and Leaf with their own

top bunks, while May and Dawn shared one of the bottom bunks, Ash and Misty sharing the other.

By the time May got back, Ash and Misty were already sprawled on one bed, both asleep in an strange tangle of limbs that would probably be painful and stiff when they woke up, and somehow, Pikachu ended up in the middle of their human knot.

Gary was above them, staring at the ceiling blankly. May couldn't see if Leaf was awake or not.

Dawn was curled up in a ball close to the wall, so May plopped down beside her, curling up so that she was facing the opposite direction. It was comforting to know that her friend was back to back with her. That small thing was really all that she could ask for. That, and the light that they all silently agreed to keep on.

...

Dr. Yung stood in front of Giovanni, an excited expression on his face. "Arceus is coming along nicely. His physical form is perfect right now, but the power levels need a little more preparation. Otherwise the real thing could defeat him easily. He'll be finished soon."

"Good," Giovanni responded, leaning back in his chair slightly. "And all the others remain stable?"

"As stable as possible with Arceus created. Should we want to use him, we may have to sacrifice some of the others."

The leader of Team Rocket nodded and stared at him thoughtfully. "We were prepared for such a loss from the beginning. Proceed with the rest of your preparations." When Dr. Yung hesitated, Giovanni raised an eyebrow. "Is there something else you need, doctor?"

"Yes," Dr. Yung answered. "I finally received and was able to review the footage from the prison Galactic lost in Sinnoh. I was reviewing it to see how Mirage Darkrai was defeated, and I found him." He held out a picture that clearly showed Ash Ketchum's face. "This isn't the first time he's meddled with us - but there is something strange about his actions. He doesn't always directly confront our comrades. In fact, he abandoned others to go and find that." Yung presented Giovanni with another image, this time showing Ash holding an orb.

"What of it?"

"I did a little bit of digging about glass orbs. I was worried he might know something that we don't, and I may have been right. I found a legend that originates on Shamouti Island about three orbs that can be used to calm the legendary birds there in a time of chaos." He showed Giovanni a picture of the orbs. They looked identical to the one Ash was holding, but different colours. "Through conjecture, I believe that there may be orbs for all types, since these ones are fire, ice, and electric. They may even be connected to legendary Pokémon. Whatever they're for, he's trying to collect them."

"You believe this is dangerous?"

"I don't know what they're for," Yung repeated, sounding annoyed with himself. "They could be trouble for us though, especially if they have a connection to the legendaries."

Giovanni stared at the images thoughtfully. "Ash Ketchum. I haven't thought of him in a while now." That was foolish of him. He brought up the files that he had collected on the boy after all the tests that he had ordered were completed. He read the first line, did a double take, and read it again.

Dr. Yung looked genuinely surprised when Giovanni started laughing almost maniacally. "Sir?"

"Do we know if the orbs on Shamouti Island are still there?"

"No, sir," Yung answered cautiously.

Giovanni pressed a button on his desk and said, "Have Annie and Oakly report to me at once." His eyes turned to Dr. Yung. "Proceed with your tests. I will take care of this."

"Sir, if I may ask, what was so amusing?"

Giovanni smiled darkly and brought something else up before turning around his monitor. "What do you see here?"

Dr. Yung studied the two images that took up the entire monitor. On the right was Ash Ketchum, on the left was another young man. He stared at them before saying, "They're related. They have the exact same hair colour, and the shape of their faces, ears and noses are far too similar to be coincidence."

"Yes. Father and son to be exact." Giovanni smirked. "That, is a picture of Master Red when he was 16."

Dr. Yung hadn't been expecting that. He continued to stare at the images as Annie and Oakly came into the office.

"You called, sir?"

"Yes. I want you two to put a team together and canvas Shamouti Island, and the surrounding smaller ones. Your first objective is to see if any orbs like these ones," he clicked to the picture of Ash holding the orb, "are there. If they are, your second objective is to capture and bring me this boy when he comes looking for them. Alive."

"I know him," Annie said suddenly. "He stopped us in Altomere." Oakly nodded in agreement.

"Then you know how slippery he can be. I will not tolerate failure in any form this time. Do you understand?"

"Sir! Yes sir!" They both echoed together.

"Good, you are dismissed." Both women left together and Giovanni looked to Dr. Yung. "I owe you thanks, doctor. You just found us the key to cracking Master Red."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

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Powerful Beyond Measure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



"Mist." Her eyes fluttered a bit as she was slowly roused from her sleep against her will. She was incredibly comfortable and warm for once, and would rather keep her heavy, slightly sore eyes closed. "Misty." She felt a gentle shake and quietly groaned.

Slowly, she opened one of her eyes and peered up at Ash, who was leaning over her, standing at the side of the bed rather than laying on it with her where he was supposed to be. A very quick glance at the window informed her that it was the middle of the night, much to her displeasure. She scowled at the boy and hissed, "What?"

Just because Ash insisted on waking her at Arceus-awful hours in the morning didn't mean that she was going to wake up anyone else sharing the room with them.

"Come on, I want to show you something," he whispered quickly, tugging at her arm.

"Can't it wait 'til morning?" she whined, voice thick with sleep.

"No. We're leaving in the morning. It'll just be a few minutes. Please?" Misty glared and Ash looked at something behind her. She felt Pikachu start poking and prodding her to get her to move.

Realizing that both trainer and Pokémon were going to be relentless, she sent Ash a magnificent scowl and made a big, yet quiet, show of getting out of the warm, comfortable, Pokémon Center bed. Pikachu gave her a thumbs up, but then curled up on the pillows.

"Come on." Ash grabbed her hand, barely giving her the chance to pull on her shoes and make sure that one of them had the cardkey to get back into the room.

They moved quietly down the stairs, and by the front desk where the Nurse Joy that was on night duty didn't even notice them.

Ash pulled Misty outside, and she could at least appreciate the fact that the air was still warm. Ambrette Town was completely quiet at night, and with the beach and the ocean in sight, it was actually rather nice. She felt something warm rise in her chest, because this was what she wanted

when she first came to Kalos. She wanted to support Ash and then go and explore some other places.

Belatedly, she realized that Ash was heading towards a strange looking tunnel beside the aquarium. It was definitely manmade, and she could see blue light swirling on the walls. "Ash?"

"Come on. We're allowed in here," he assured her, tugging her along with him. They went inside, rounded the corner, and her mouth fell open.

The tunnel was actually a wide corridor that cut through a part of the mountain, glass tanks on either side that led towards the tanks of the aquarium. The nocturnal Pokémon swam by, glancing at them curiously.

"I figured, you wanted to see this and who knows when we'll get the next chance. It's not the real aquarium, but it's as close as we can get for now." Ash's small smile fell. "Who knows what might happen, right?"

Misty's annoyance was completely gone now, a soft expression crossing her features. She slowly let go of his hand and walked towards the tank and put her palm against it, smiling at the Chinchou that drifted by.

Suddenly, she didn't see the Pokémon behind the tank, she saw Daisy staring back at her. Misty gasped and jerked backwards, realizing that it wasn't really there as Ash grabbed her shoulders, grounding her in reality even if he didn't realize it.

"The nightmare I saw in the cave," she spoke up before he could ask. "My sisters were behind a glass wall with water coming in on them, before it shattered on me."

Ash's hands squeezed her shoulders a little more tightly than she expected. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Raising an eyebrow, Misty looked up at him, a bit surprised by his pained expression. She quickly realized that he was sorry for bringing her to a place that made her relive that, even just for a moment. Of course, he would know the pain of reliving nightmares. Misty turned and patted his cheek gently. "No, no. I'm glad we came here. I can't...I won't let myself fear this." She motioned to the aquarium. "I won't."

Ash watched her before smiling and shaking his head. "I don't get how you're so strong."

"You are too. I can see the difference since we got here." He tilted his head at that, his stare inquisitive. "You didn't shut in on yourself despite whatever Arceus-awful nightmare you must have seen. It's a good thing."

Instead of arguing, or putting himself down, Ash seemed to think about it for a moment before nodding his head. Misty smiled a bit as she hugged him, feeling a lot lighter. They stood like that quietly, with only the sound of the ocean waves and the occasional Pokémon cry in the air.

Without warning, Misty grabbed the front of Ash's shirt and jerked him down towards her. He grunted, surprised by the sudden motion, but didn't at all protest as she pressed her lips to him. Misty tilted her head, her fingers running through his hair, pulling him as close as she possibly could, feeling one of his hands rest on her waist while the other was pressed against her back.

For a brief moment, there was peace. For a brief moment, it was easy to pretend that there was nothing wrong in the world. Except that Misty couldn't pretend that everything was alright, not even for a moment. Though her lips moved with Ash's, her back hitting the tank behind her as they

stumbled a bit, her mind ran over a thousand different things at once.

They couldn't run. There was absolutely nowhere to go anymore. Though Kalos was peaceful, if Giovanni had it his way the world would be on its knees before him. She wanted to save Ash, but Cilan was right, everyone was right, she was doing it completely wrong.

Misty wanted to fix her gym. She wanted to get it back up and running, even if it was just in honour of her sisters. Maybe she wouldn't be a Water Pokémon Master, having to run it, but that would be okay. If that was the one thing she had to sacrifice to get everything else, that was fine by her. She wanted her home back in a world where they weren't constantly looking over their shoulders. She wanted to get married and have a herd of rambunctious children with Ash. In that future, they were all safe, they were all alive. That was what she needed to strive towards, not just keeping Ash in one piece now (though she'd certainly try to help with that too).

Ash might not feel like he had it in him to save the world, but that was alright for now. She would believe in him, so would everyone else, until he could see it again. They were going to save the world so that all of them had a future to go towards.

Misty pulled away from Ash, only realizing then that her lungs were screaming for air. She couldn't stop herself from smiling, feeling warmth rush through her when Ash smiled at her in response. It was so genuine and honest, the Ash that she had known for so long.

Then he yawned broadly, and she laughed. Misty tugged at Ash's hand. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" His fingers easily slid between hers.

"Back to sleep before we just end up crashing here. I don't think anyone would appreciate a couple of teenagers making out against, and then falling asleep in, an aquarium."

Still holding her hand, Ash let out a genuine, bellowing laugh, even though it really wasn't that funny. Tears started to prick at his eyes from the laughter and tremors that ran through him. He was actually a bit surprised with himself. He couldn't remember the last time he really laughed, but in that moment, he realized that he missed it. He missed laughing and being able to train his Pokémon like a normal person. He missed exploring with his friends and discovering the beautiful and amazing things in the world.

Warmth rushed through his chest as a wave of determination that he hadn't felt in a while surged through him. He wanted that back not just for him, but for his friends too. Though rather selfish and self-centered when he was younger, he relished in his friends' personal victories as well, encouraging them to chase their own dreams even if it meant saying goodbye for a little while.

Ash felt like an idiot. Yes, there was a lot of pressure on his shoulders, he was self-aware enough to know that, but everyone else had willingly given up relative safety, and it certainly wasn't for the world. It was for him. They truly didn't understand what it felt like to not have a choice in the end, to be forcefully given a destiny that was too much for a single person, not really. They knew what it felt like in theory though, and that's why they were there, so he wouldn't have to do it alone.

"Ash?" Misty whispered, frowning a bit as they got back to the Pokémon Center. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head slowly, because he was still lost in his thoughts that hit him like a speeding train. He had never been alone, even when it felt like it. Ash wanted to make his own choices so much, yet here he was disregarding his friends' choices as unimportant like he used to when he was younger.

He pictured Ritchie, blue eyes filled with determination and life, so much like him. Ritchie who took advantage of a situation that got twisted against him. Ritchie that would have kept on fighting if he had lived, no matter how injured he was. He pictured Reggie, injured so badly that Ash had no idea if he was still alive. He pictured Cresselia hovering sadly over the deceased Darkrai that tried to protect something that wasn't even his duty to protect. He pictured Cobalion on the ground. He pictured Groudon and Kyogre fighting with their fakes and what those mirages did to them. He pictured Drew, who chose to let go instead of dragging May and Serena with him.

He pictured what would happen to Arceus if he faced off against a Mirage Arceus without whatever they were doing.

Their sacrifices, and the sacrifices of every other person and Pokémon, couldn't be in vain. It couldn't, but it would if he didn't pull himself together. It hurt, and it wouldn't stop hurting, but he wasn't alone. He needed to step up again for his friends, for everyone else both person and Pokémon, and for himself.

"Why are you crying?" Misty whispered as they got back to their room, not paying attention to the fact that Leaf and Gary were both gone, or that May and Dawn were still soundly asleep in the bed they were sharing. Her focus was completely on Ash as she pressed her palm against his cheek as silent tears slid down them.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu murmured.

He wiped his forearm across his eyes and smiled at both Misty and Pikachu. "I'm okay." He didn't have to say that he was okay as anyone could be in the situation, that came as a given these days anyway. Even if it didn't, Misty and Pikachu were the two that he didn't have to explain everything to. That's why he knew that they knew.

For the first time in a long time, it was completely true.

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Leaf looked down as the familiar, but strange laugh reached her ears. A soft smile crossed her features as she looked up towards the sky. It was nice to hear Ash laughing again, but whatever he and Misty were doing was their business.

It was strange, since they finally had the chance to sleep in relative comfort and safety, but no she wanted to be outside. They had spent the last couple of months outside for the most part in such a strange variety of weather that it sounded like a poorly slapped together plot that used weather for excuses for events, when she thought about it.

Leaf shook her head. She was tired. Still, she wanted to look at the stars.

Tilting her head slightly as she heard footsteps approaching her, Leaf recognized Gary's silhouette anywhere. He didn't say anything as he sat down beside her on the edge of the cliff, one leg dancing over the ledge while he kept his other knee propped up, his arm resting against it.

"Can't sleep?" he asked after a moment.

"I'll go back soon," she assured him, staring up at the sky. "I just wanted to be out here, as strange as it sounds."

"It's peaceful here," Gary supplied. "It feels like everything else has been an Arceus-awful nightmare. But then I move my shoulder the wrong way and I remember that it's all real."

She frowned, reaching out to touch his shoulder. She had forgotten that his arm still hurt him from time to time after being impaled back in Hoenn. That felt like eons ago, or, like Gary suggested, a nightmare. She had almost lost him then.

"I'm sorry," Leaf said suddenly, and Gary raised an eyebrow at her. "I know what I said before when we were disguised, about giving a relationship a shot, and I want to, I do, but—"

"Now's not the time," he finished for her. It had been on his mind too. They agreed to give it a shot but nothing had really changed since then. It had frustrated him at times, but he understood.

"Yeah." She nodded her head, and silence fell over them.

Gary tapped his fingers against his leg before saying, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For being an emotional asshole that flips out at everyone. Now and in the past." He looked a bit unsure before his stare turned to the ground. "To be honest, I think I do it because I'm...scared and don't want to admit it. I don't really know how to handle fear and I push others away, even though it's the last thing I want." He glanced over at Leaf and saw that she was listening keenly, but not interrupting or judging him. Encouraged by this, he continued. "Misty asked me once why I came with you guys, and I think I figured it out. What I saw in that nightmare – my grandfather, my father...it made me realize that I...don't want to be alone. So my natural reaction is to be a jerk, which naturally puts people off of me. Great reaction, huh? That's why I came. I didn't want to lose you or Ash again so soon after getting you both back." He shook his head. "Those other kids were never my friends. Not like you two. They cared about the Oak part of me. You guys cared about Gary."

There was a long, pause, but it wasn't an uncomfortable one. Gary thought that he'd squirm with embarrassment after admitting such a thing, but he didn't. He did feel a little foolish that he was afraid of being alone when there were much worse things to fear those days, but he couldn't change the way he felt.

"Mine was, once again, about the fact that I don't want to be compared to my mom. How's that for sad? The world's ending and the worst thing to me, is to be too much like the woman that gave birth to me. She's not even close to being the worst person in the world. I mean, this has even gotten in the way of our group dynamics." Leaf smacked her hand against the ground. "The worst thing is that I know I am like her. As much as I try to prove otherwise, I do everything the same. I'd take any opportunity, even if it meant doing something questionable to save any one of you, and that's exactly what she did for your father and Red."

Gary thought about that before eyeing her hesitantly. "This is just a suggestion, I could be completely wrong, but did you ever think that maybe you being afraid of being like her might not actually be a fear of being like her?"

Leaf raised an eyebrow. "Think about what you just said."

He held up a hand in surrender. "I mean, it might not be being like her right now that you're afraid of. What if it's becoming like her after everything was over – alone, her friends dead or having abandoned her, so in turn, she doesn't let anyone get close, not even her own daughter."

Leaf thought about laying in a house completely alone, knowing that Gary was dead and never coming back, that Ash had walked away from her, that everyone else was either dead or just gone. Her heart constricted at the thought, and she struggled to keep in a sob that desperately wanted to

rise up in her throat.

It hit her so hard then. Gary was right.

When a sound finally escaped her, it was a strange twist of a laugh and a sob. She looked at Gary. "I guess that makes us the same in what we fear then, isn't it."

"I guess it does," he agreed, staring out over Ambrette Town. He glanced down at his hand when Leaf took it in hers a moment later.

"When this is over, we'll try, because I do forgive you for everything." Her voice held such conviction, like there was no doubt that everything would be over eventually.

Gary's fingers curled around hers. "I forgive you too."

...

"So Diancie said that we need to see the dragon next?" Cilan asked as he stared at the paper map before them.

"Yeah," Serena answered, twisting her wet hair around her finger. She had spent far too long in the shower that morning but had very little regrets about that. "There's only one dragon legendary in Kalos."

"Zygarde," Clemont finished for her, his brow furrowed as he typed rapidly on his laptop. He felt comfortable actually using it since no one was tracking them in Kalos that they knew of. "Rumour has it that Zygarde lives in the Terminus Cave, but a few months ago, not long before the Kalos League, Zygarde was said to have been seen fairly close to Lumiose City." His eyes turned up towards Ash, who was picking at the last of his food at the table across from him. "Do you know anything about that?"

Ash paused and then looked at him. "Team Flare was going to use Zygarde to destroy things, take over the world, whatever. We stopped it." Ash didn't want to tell Clemont how close Lysandre had come to almost attacking Lumiose City, that his original plans had been to attack after the league, but of all people Jessie and James had stumbled onto the plot and risked arrest to warn Diantha.

"I wish you had told us," Serena sighed as she stared at him. "We could have helped. You didn't have to do everything on your own."

"Same here," Iris agreed from where she was sitting, brushing her long hair so that she could tie it back again. "I get you wanted to keep your abilities as quiet as possible, but I wish you had trusted us more."

Ash blinked at her, clearly taken back. "It...Iris, it wasn't about trust. I trusted you. I trusted Cilan, Serena, Clemont, and Bonnie too. I didn't want anyone else to get hurt because of me."

"We wouldn't have—"

"People have died because of me before," Ash interrupted, his voice surprisingly straightforward, like he was speaking basic facts. Even years later – three for him but thousands in reality – Ash could still see the pain in Damos' eyes when he realized that he was going to let him die to save Arceus. It had only been a split second, but it would be seared in his mind forever. "If you didn't get dragged into those situations with me, at least I knew you were safe." That was really the crux of his deception. He wasn't strong enough to lose his friends.

A wave of determination rushed through him, similar to the night before, as he looked down at his empty plate. They could have easily died because of him recently. Now, Ash knew he couldn't really blame himself in theory, depression was a nasty thing that was nearly impossible to control, but in practice it was a lot harder. He wouldn't let it happen again. He wouldn't.

"You're such a kid," Iris replied to him with a note of finality, finishing the conversation on a lighter note. Everyone was honestly glad for that.

"The Terminus Cave is almost smack dab between Anistar City and Couriway Town. Depending on where we can get first. Both would work and we'll just walk from there." Gary said, pointing at the map. His eyes rose up to Ash again. "Don't suppose you could ask Giratina to give us a lift? It's relatively safe here."

"It's not like she's waiting around for us," Misty answered for Ash.

"He could be," Gary replied, a bit of a challenge to his voice.

Misty slapped her hand on the table. "Listen here, I swear Giratina is female."

"Definitely male, didn't you hear his voice?"

"Yes!"

Ash rolled his eyes. Aside from some legendary Pokémon like Latios or Latias, or those that identified themselves specifically as a certain gender, most of them sounded like whatever a person thought they would. The only exception was Arceus that sounded like everything and nothing at the same time (it was truly surreal). So really, both Misty and Gary were right. He kept that to himself as Misty placed the second piece of toast she grabbed, but apparently didn't want, on his plate.

"That's a lot of spots, Cilan," Dawn noted as she looked at the train routes he was mapping out with a bit of excitement.

"Yes, I know. It's just in case though," he admitted. "We seem to be safe at the moment, and we could try to make a straight line to Anistar City or Couriway Town, but we'd still have to make at least two stops. Just in case someone is still tracking us – Ash, Misty, Team Rocket grabbed his mom, and Bonnie here, after all – so going on a couple detours, just jumping from train to train, might throw off anyone who could be tracking us. Just a safety precaution."

"You just want to see the trains around here," Iris said, nudging his shoulder. He shrugged, not bothering to deny it, because he knew his reasoning was completely sound about taking precautions.

"How much longer would it take?" May asked curiously.

"If we go to Anistar City, it'd be the difference of getting there at night as opposed to getting there in the morning," Cilan explained. "On the other hand, with the trains to Couriway, it'd be the next day. There's a big layover in the last train heading there."

"How do we get down to the Terminus Cave from Anistar City?" Leaf asked, tapping her hand on the table, making it clear where she thought that should go. "Take more cars?"

"We could rent them for once," Serena toned in dryly.

"Shouldn't waste our money on that," Gary said with a shake of his head. "We really don't have all

that much left between us." He glanced at Cilan. "Can we get transfers at some places, or do we have to keep paying at every stop?"

"There are places in both," Cilan said. "A straight line would be cheaper and fast, but jumping from spot to spot would be safer."

"Why don't we put it to a vote?" May suggested. There were really pros and cons to both ideas. "All those to go on the detour of different stops, raise your hand."

Cilan's hand rose, along with Iris, Serena, May, and Leaf. Dawn pressed her lips together and said, "Half and half, right?"

"You guys all want to go straight there?" Leaf asked. Misty, Gary, Dawn, and Clemont, all nodded their heads, causing her to frown. "Ash?"

He tilted his head slightly, biting his lip. Personally, he thought they should just go there, a complete mad dash across Kalos. It would be faster and more than anything he felt like time was really important. Still, it was true that there was a small faction of Team Rocket working in Kalos as of a few months ago and they could track them, so for the safety of his friends, the more random route seemed better. Speed or defense; those were the different strategies before them. If he went with speed, they'd keep talking about it.

"Detour," he said, but not without a bit of reluctance. Thankfully, no one decided to question him.

"We'll probably have to walk to the Terminus Cave," Clemont pointed out. "If we take the extra time to go around Kalos, we should start heading right down that way." There was an odd firmness to his voice that left no room for argument.

Serena raised an eyebrow at him and glanced at Gary, who shrugged and turned his attention to the blond boy. "Sounds good to me. We should all get our stuff together, finish getting ready, get our Pokémon from Nurse Joy, and head out."

"Get a few more provisions before we leave too," Misty added to his list of things to do, and he nodded.

Everyone got up from the tables they were occupying in the Pokémon Center, heading towards their rooms to get ready to set out again. Their night of peace was one they all needed, but they needed to get moving. There was really no time left to waste.

Clemont suddenly grabbed Serena's hand. She looked back at him curiously, and he said, "I was wondering if you could do me a favour."

"Sure, what's up?"

"Come with me." Clemont dragged her off without another word.

...

There was something nice about racing across a region with no one taking notice of you, and not worrying about being caught for grand theft auto. May wondered what her parents would have said if she told them everything that happened since she last saw them. She wondered what Brendan would say. A twinge ran through her as she thought of Drew. He wouldn't believe her at first, but she would have gotten him to come around eventually.

She leaned against the window of the train, pressing her forehead against the glass and staring

outside. He would have loved Kalos. Though they only made a couple brief stops so far to swap trains, even backtracking once, she got to see enough to know that it was beautiful. Though he denied it, Drew certainly had an eye for details and an appreciation for more of the beautiful things in life.

May closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked around to see Dawn smiling at her. May smiled again, mentally counting her blessings for having the other girl along with them. Dawn's smile and optimism kept her sane when really nothing else could (she wasn't counting that period of time where vengeance was her motivator), and she would forever appreciate that.

Leaning back once again, May glanced out the window and gasped. "Wow, look at it. That's Lumiose City, isn't it?"

Dawn got on her knees, balancing over May to press her hands against the glass and look outside. "It is! Oh wow, it's amazing! Look at the Prism Tower!" She twisted to look over her shoulder. "That's your gym, right Clemont?"

"Yeah," he answered, and winced. Clemont wondered about the state of the gym, not just the building, but officially. His family was allowed to leave on vacations, sure, but they had been gone for months. Kalos wasn't like the other regions, everything didn't come to a stop. There were probably still trainers and challengers searching for a badge that no one was there to give. Abandoning a gym meant losing it, and that one had been in his family for ages. Surely Diantha would understand, since his father was in Kanto with no way of leaving.

Clemont's hands clenched against the fabric of his overalls. His father shouldn't have been dragged into this mess, neither should Bonnie. They should have been here, in Lumiose City, where it was safe.

"Clemont?" He jerked with surprise at Serena's voice. He looked up at her face, marred by a frown. She looked out the window as Lumiose loomed ever closer. "I wish my mom was safe here too." She bit her lip and lowered her voice. "At least when we get home, we know we still have a home here."

"That's true," he agreed. "It doesn't make it easier, not knowing if anything happened to them."

"They're not alone. They're okay, I'm sure of it." Serena spoke with such certainty, that Clemont couldn't really find it in him to disagree.

In the seats behind them, Misty had been sitting with her head on Ash's shoulder, Pikachu sitting on her lap, half dozing while he stared out the window. Ash nudged her, and she fully woke up to look out the window. Instead of gaping or smiling like the others, a frown passed her features. "The train station is where Team Rocket took your mother and I."

Ash frowned a bit. "I forgot about that. This is literally where it started for us. I would have fought back and got myself and Bonnie away from Team Rocket if they didn't have you and mom. This is where it began for us, even if Team Rocket had been kidnapping and killing people for months beforehand."

"Hey." Misty grabbed his hand and squeezed tightly. "Do me a favour? Don't let anyone grab me while we run to the next train." He didn't say anything, but his tight grip was enough of an answer for her. Pikachu shifted on her lap and, his paw patting her hand as if reassuring her that he'd be there for her too.

Sure, Misty could save herself, but having backup never hurt either.

Unfortunately, there was a slight layover in Lumiose City, so they moved together towards a corner, Ash and Serena drawing their hats down over their faces more while Clemont kept surrounded by others. They were the three that people would easily identify there.

"On the TV," Iris spoke up. "Isn't that Champion Diantha?"

They looked up curiously, and sure enough, there was the Champion standing before a podium, speaking to a large group of people.

Curious, the group moved closer to listen to what the woman was saying. She looked just as beautiful as always, but her blue eyes were stern, her expression hardened and serious. She looked ready to go to war at a given moment herself.

"...Kalos is my priority, as it should be." They heard her say as they got closer to the television. "I am your Champion, and I will continue to fight for you along with the Prime Minister and the rest of the government. We will not let Kalos fall to this senseless violence perpetrated by Team Rocket and their fake legendary Pokémon." People in the visible press section suddenly burst into questions, but she held up a hand to silence them. "Yes, let it be known, that they are indeed fake legendary Pokémon. They are not the ones we've looked up to for centuries, however, they are just as dangerous, perhaps even more so, and there is the potential that they could appear within our region in the future, but we will fight them."

Some people asked her questions about that, but Diantha fielded them with practiced ease until she found a statement that she could talk more to. "To those from Kanto, Johto, Hoenn, Sinnoh, and Unova, I assure you once again that you are welcome here for as long as you need to be. To our Kalos citizens currently stranded within one of those regions, if you hear this, know that your family and friends are safe here, your lives are safe here when you return."

"Guys," Gary whispered. "We need to go or we're going to miss the train."

A bit reluctantly, they pulled themselves away from the television. Serena nudged Clemont gently and said, "Looks like that's your answer about the gym. It's a little win."

Clemont sighed, his shoulders slumping a bit, but he nodded at her. "Little wins, for right now."

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Iris yawned as her eyes slowly blinked open. She looked around with confusion before realizing that they were still on the train. She groaned a bit and looked up towards the window, only to see the sky burning with a bright orange sunset. She sat up, from where she was resting beside Cilan and stretched out. "We almost there?"

"Yeah." He nodded his head. Everyone else was certainly tired of being on trains and running from one to another one, but he looked like a kid in a candy store.

It was funny how a couple days without being hunted or in direct danger made everyone act a little lighter. Sure, sometimes when things got too quiet, Iris could see her friends retreating a bit into themselves, no doubt still thinking about the nightmares that they saw in the Glittering Cave, but it was good to see smiles. If that was something that she noticed, she could only imagine what someone like Serena, Misty, or Clemont, who had been in this mess since the beginning, noticed.

Everyone was all too eager to get off the train and actually have solid ground to stand on.

"Oh, wow," Dawn gasped, her eyes going wide. "Look at that!" The sunset made Anistar City sparkle, sending rainbows arching across the surfaces of the city.

"That's beautiful," Misty agreed in complete awe. "What on earth is it?"

"That's a sundial," Serena explained. "If you're here at the right time of day, it's amazing. Even more than this! The rings in the middle spin and you can see sparks in the sky like snow." She clasped her hands together and sighed whimsically. "We missed that though, if I remember the times right."

"We need to get moving," Clemont urged them.

"Yeah, you're right," Misty agreed, albeit, reluctantly. She looked at the colours dancing across the city almost wistfully. "I'd like to come back to see this too. It's almost like an aurora."

"An aurora?" Ash repeated, squinting his eyes a bit. "I guess I see it. Auroras are cooler though. Especially things like Aurora Beams. It's even a neat word to say."

"A neat word?" the redhead asked slowly, and he shrugged.

"Guys!" Iris called out to them. "Flirt later! Let's go!"

Misty shifted her backpack onto her shoulders, and they started to walk, her mind straying from her conversation with Ash. She looked up at the sky that was a blend of deep blues and oranges as day gave way to night. They were so close. If they were right (and she was sure that they were), they were fairly close to the Dragon Orb. After that, there was only water, fire, ice, and electric, and they knew where three of them were.

They were so close. Once they had all the orbs, Arceus would do whatever with them to stop Team Rocket, and everything would be okay.

Misty's heart sank a bit. She didn't want to voice any pessimism, they didn't need that now, but she got the feeling that it wasn't going to be that easy, and given everything they went through so far, that thought made her feel sick.

...

They had all gotten far too used to cars and the quickness they provided with getting from point A to point B. It was a bit frustrating trekking over the terrain and knowing that they could have been there already. On the other hand, there was something about walking in the outdoors without it being some extreme form of weather. Clemont and Serena both confirmed that it was a little bit warmer than normal for that time of year, but not nearly to the extreme that other regions suffered.

Dawn eyed the blond boy oddly as she walked behind him. He seemed so eager and insistent for them to keep going forward, even when he himself looked like he could use a break. Serena didn't seem worried about him, so the blue-haired girl figured that she knew and it wasn't a big deal. It was just so strange of him.

They avoided areas that were heavily wooded or heavily grassy. Though Team Rocket, or any other team, wasn't causing problems in Kalos at the moment, the Pokémon were very defensive and wary of anyone. They realized that pretty quickly when a group of Flabebe started to chase them about an hour before. It was best to just avoid them. If anything, they could sense the impact that this entire mess was having more than any person could.

The Sinnoh native had a theory about the group. The air in Kalos itself seemed to be lighter to the

point where Ash could actually sense it, and that, or maybe something else too, she didn't know, made him a little more easy-going, a little more like the friend she had met years ago. That, in turn, made everyone else perk up and feel a bit more optimistic. They were so close to getting all the spheres that maybe, just maybe, it was okay to let themselves hope for the best.

Allowing the carefree air to take her over for just a bit, Dawn climbed onto one of the train tracks that they were walking by, carefully balancing herself as she walked forward. Pikachu had been walking on them, and glanced back at her with amusement.

May came up to walk alongside her, and though she didn't say anything, Dawn got the distinct impression that it was to catch her if she stumbled off. May was an awesome friend like that. "Hey, Dawn?"

"Hmm?" The blue-haired girl looked down curiously at her friend, who was speaking in a very low tone so she wouldn't attract attention from anyone else.

"I've been thinking about the orbs that are left," May explained, her voice almost hesitant. "We're pretty sure the dragon one is here, and we know where fire, ice, and electric are...but water is something else and there really aren't that many legendary Pokémon that are water-types. Kyogre's gone with only an egg in the Distortion World, we didn't get it from Palkia or Keldeo so...what if it's Manaphy?"

"I suppose that makes sense." Dawn perked up a bit. "Doesn't it have that Sea Temple? Orb might be there."

"That's the problem. It moves, and there's really no easy way to find it." Her shoulders slumped as she spoke.

"Of course not," Dawn sighed. There had to be a catch somewhere. She looked forward, and realized that the tracks ended – broken off at the edge of a ledge Pikachu was standing by. She stopped behind him and looked down. There were jutting rocks, thick grass, and abandoned tracks and mine cars below them. "I think we're in the right place."

"We got a bit ahead of everyone," May pointed out. Dawn looked over her shoulder, not having realized that they were quite so far ahead of everyone else.

"Oops," the girl said with a small shrug. The breeze brushed by her, and she wet her finger a bit, holding it in the air. "Hmmm."

"What are you doing?" May blinked up at her.

"Just checking the wind, but I don't think this is a good spot." The brunette didn't look any less confused so Dawn clarified what she meant. "I'm still looking for a place to put the seeds Shaymin gave me. I haven't found anywhere that feels right yet."

"Oh! I forgot about that!" May shrugged. "Maybe it'd be better to wait until after this is over? So they don't get lost or ruined?"

"Maybe. Unless I find the right spot."

Having just walked into their conversation, no one else knew what they were talking about. Cilan nodded his head and said, "This is the right spot." Or at least, it was the spot they were aiming to find. He looked over his shoulder at Ash for confirmation.

Everyone's eyes turned to the boy, and almost became worried at his shell-shocked expression. He

had been so strong, so upbeat, but that expression was the one they had become familiar with in Unova.

"Ash?" Leaf prompted. "You alright?"

"I can't tell if it's there." His shoulders slumped.

"What do you mean, you can't tell if it's there?" Iris questioned him, raising an eyebrow.

"They're strong and I have a ton of them in my bag," he motioned to his pack in reference to the orbs that are in there. "It was hard sensing things with them around before, but after the fairy one it's been super hard. Plus the cave itself...well...I think you need to see it to believe it."

"Let's go see it then," Leaf spoke up and tossed a Pokéball into the air. Venusaur appeared, and Leaf ran her hand along the Pokémon's smooth skin. "Care to use Vine Whip to get us down?"

"Saur!" the Pokémon replied eagerly. All of them were much more lively once they had been properly treated. Pokéballs healed a bit, they kept them safe and almost like they were in a suspended state, but there was nothing like being fully healed and ready to go. Vines rose into the air and went to the ground below, allowing them to slide down a few at a time, before Leaf called her Pokémon back.

They walked towards the cave, creeping inside. At first, it just appeared to be a normal cave and no one was quite sure why Ash was acting like it was an amazing thing. The Glittering Cave was more impressive than that.

Ash stopped and waved his hand for the rest to go. "Give me a sec, you go ahead." Pikachu patted his head from where he sat on his shoulder.

Iris gasped when they walked inside of a cavern that seemed to glow from all different angles with a bluish-green light. She turned around in a circle, staring at everything in awe. "Oh wow."

"It's beautiful," Dawn whispered, and Leaf nodded in agreement.

"Absolutely stunning!" Cilan cried out

Gary glanced down at May when she didn't comment. "You don't seem surprised to see this." He was, and he had seen Arceus before.

"I've seen something like this before," May admitted. "Misty and I both did." She looked around as Ash finally walked in. "This is Aura, right? Just like the Tree of Beginning?"

"Yeah," Ash nodded.

"You good?" Misty asked.

"Just needed to prep myself to see this mess. I'm okay," Ash assured her, motioning to the light around the room.

"I never even thought," Serena spoke up, casting Clemont a quick glance as he sat down and started pulling all kinds of things out of his bag. She looked towards Ash again. "Is this what you see when you concentrate?"

"No, this is what I see all the time."

"Seriously?" Iris asked as she looked around. It was bright, and she couldn't imagine seeing the

world only like that. "Can you see other colours or anything? Do you have to close your eyes?"

"I can see the glow when my eyes are closed too," he admitted, walking forward. Pikachu jumped from his shoulder and took a drink of the glowing water. "Riley was an Aura Guardian in Sinnoh. In the end, he was the last one – I don't count. He taught me a lot of things once I met him. Till then I was just figuring things out as I went. He taught me how to ignore Aura unless I need it.

"He...was the last one?" Iris asked cautiously.

"Team Rocket took him when they were kidnapping people before everything went to hell. He's dead. Everyone they took is," Misty answered when Ash wouldn't.

He was too focused on the pang in his chest. He hadn't thought about his old mentor in a while. He hadn't thought about any of the people who had been captured when Team Rocket still worked in the shadows. So many people captured, so many people died. Ash wondered if Master Red was still alive.

"I'm sorry," Iris said, looking at her feet as she played with her sleeve. She hadn't meant to bring up a sensitive topic, not wanting to get him upset again.

Ash saw that sadness in her eyes and his breath hitched in his throat. He didn't want to see anyone sad or in pain anymore. Mentally scrambling, he said, "This type of Aura is just like a default one. Everyone has their own coloured aura that I can see." Lower-cased aura, since everyone had an aura, but not everyone could use Aura. That confused him so much at first.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I explained that when we were in Hoenn." He turned around to Dawn, who stood beside him, and tapped her forehead. She scowled at him playfully and lightly smacked his hand away. "Yours is bright pink and really strong. There's a bit of blue too at times – from your mother probably. There's also some red and purple too." He turned to Iris. "Yours is yellow with some purple and green around it." Ash's eyes flickered to Cilan, and he did a double take, glancing back at Iris' before looking at him with a grin. "Yours is mostly green, but there's some red, blue, and yellow too. It's not just seeing them, you all just feel different too." He genuinely loved all of his friends' unique auras. Every single one of them brought comfort to him.

"Pikapi," Pikachu spoke up. "Cha Pikachu pi pika pika chu."

"Oh, right. Thanks buddy. The problem with the orb is this." He motioned to the room. "Between all the orbs with us, and this, I won't be able to feel it."

"So we'll have to split up to cover more ground," Clemont spoke up, and everyone turned to him. He had a bunch of strange things on the ground.

"What are these?" Gary asked, squatting down to look at them curiously.

"Probes. I can control them from here and sent them into the caves to map everything out. I think. I started planning this early, but it's been hard to work on. I finished it when everyone was asleep on the train. That way we can pick different routes and mark them so we don't get lost," he explained. "If someone finds it, they run back and get Ash."

"That's why you asked me to go get different colours of spray paint!" Serena cried out, startling everyone. Clemont's face went red. "You've been planning this the whole time!" That was what made him act so odd lately.

He rubbed the back of his head. "Yeah. I just wasn't sure if I'd get them working but the system seems to be working. And not blowing up."

"That sounds like a plan to me," Misty agreed. "How are we splitting up? Groups of two?"

"Probably for the best," Clemont said with a nod of his head. "Last time we were here we ran into some trouble with a group of people in the cave. For all we know there could be someone here trying to find Zygard since this is where it's rumoured to be. Just because Team Rocket's not active here, nor Team Flare, doesn't mean there might not be a small pocket of people here."

"Wait a sec," Serena interrupted, her brow furrowing in thought. She looked over at Ash. "Those people we fought. They were from Team Flare, weren't they?"

"Yeah." Ash shrugged. "I recognized them later on when I met them again."

Clemont didn't really pay attention to them, prepping to release the probes down to the tunnels below. "Now, there's really no rhyme or reason to where the shrines are. The ones that have been underground seemed to be really well hidden, but the above ground ones are generally right in the open so we have to be prepared for the possibility that they could be close by too."

"There's also the fact that we might walk right by a secret section in the tunnels," Gary added with a frown.

"What do we do then?" Dawn wondered.

"We get Ash to walk down those marked off tunnels until we find it." Misty looked at her boyfriend. "Sorry." He just shrugged.

"Actually, about that," Clemont said. "Someone should stick here to monitor everything that's happening. We don't have enough walkie talkies and there's no time for me to make more. We got rid of all our other communication devices a while ago so we don't have any way to keep in contact with everyone. If someone finds the shrine, they'd have to run back, and run down whatever one Ash went down and all the way back." He looked up at his friend. "You should hang back by the entrance to the tunnels so that no one has to run around on a wild Swanna-chase to find you. I'll stay with you and monitor the probes."

"If you think that's best," Ash decided with a shrug. He had no idea if he even needed to be the one to lift the orb from the shrine, or if they could be given to him by someone else, but it wasn't worth the risk since they didn't know. Otherwise there would be no need for him to have to go personally. As it stood, they didn't know what would happen, so it was better just to go with the safe route, and if him staying in one spot made everything easier on everyone else, he was completely down for it.

Little lights lit up on the probe, and Ash had to wonder when the hell Clemont had time to make something like that (though there was the possibility that it was something he had started way before now but put on the back burner until it was useful). Like with most things his friend created, Ash had to marvel at them as the balls rolled down into the caves.

They all waited with baited breath as a map slowly started to form on Clemont's screen, starting with one tunnel and branching out into two, then four, and so on.

"Oh god," May groaned when she saw the size of it. Some tunnels seemed to just end, which was a relief, but others twisted around so badly that it almost gave her a headache to look at.

"Well, I guess we should get started," Misty said, a grim tone to her voice.

"And you're sure you can't feel the orb?" Gary asked Ash again, sighing when his friend shook his head. "Well shit. Alright. Let's get going."

Groups were decided. Spray paint canisters were handed out. Ash flopped to the ground beside Clemont as he watched everyone else walk into the caverns, the blond's attention on the screen before him.

Pikachu climbed up onto Ash's lap, cooing a bit as the boy scratched his ears. He looked up as Ash took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Just because he couldn't find the orb in the twisting lights of all the ones they collected, and the naturally powerful Aura within the Terminus Cave, didn't mean that he couldn't try to keep track of his friends.

Maybe then he would know which one had found the shrine and they wouldn't have to come back.

...

Professor Samuel Oak had been born, and had grown up, during the Kantonian Civil War. Once a vast region that expanded beyond the Silver Mountain Range in the north, things had been peaceful for a very long time. Then the war broke out between the North and the South. Many of the records about why the conflict had overcome the region were lost over the years, and Professor Oak never once found out what happened.

That was why he went to Johto when he was young to study Pokémon. He believed that they were more than weapons like so many people used them as. The sad part was that not many people shared the sentiment at the time, though the people in Johto were a little more open to the idea. There was some worship behind Ho-oh, Lugia, Celebi, and the three legendary beasts that didn't exist for the three legendary birds in Kanto. People were amazed by Articuno, Moltres, and Zapdos and their powers, that was true, but they didn't necessarily have the same awe-inspiring legends that people believed in.

In many ways, it frustrated young Sammy Oak. Then he was catapulted into the future where he met a boy that absolutely fascinated him, one that had a good heart and a love for Pokémon that seemed almost foreign to him. It was awe-inspiring.

Sammy never forgot Ash. He never forgot that peaceful world. That was a large part that pushed him forward so he could see that bright future again. It was why he could proudly hold his head up when people asked him why he didn't become a soldier – why he chose research and to help that way instead.

Once the war was over, nearly an entire generation had been wiped off the face of southern Kanto, leaving single mothers, saddened and ashamed elderly people, and children that had no real structure or motivation in their lives. His own son and daughter had been amongst that generation of children. They were certainly much better off than Northern Kanto, which was nothing but shambles and ruins that were abandoned beyond the mountains – completely uninhabitable.

Within the chaos, a new threat rose up, lingering in the shadows and controlling Kanto in terrifying ways. Samuel Oak started to fear the worst.

Then he met a boy with the last name Ketchum and had to do a double-take. The name didn't match though. Jack Ketchum certainly wasn't mistakable with Ash Ketchum. Jack was a pale, skinny boy that wanted to explore the world. There was an eagerness to him that prompted strong nostalgia within Professor Oak. With his messy, raven-black hair, and a determination that flared through his narrow, crimson eyes, Jack – or Red as he was called – made Samuel wonder if the future had been altered and if this was Ash. He even ended up getting a Pikachu.

Then everything went to hell again because of Team Rocket. When Red went missing, Samuel met a girl with long, blonde hair, determination and spirit like he had never seen, and bright brown eyes that reflected all of her inner emotions. He had seen those eyes before. No matter how much time had passed, he would never forget them.

Death, tragedy, and victory echoed through their lives, out of his reach to prevent. People were murdered in cold blood, those murders covered up. Red changed all this when he became the Pokémon Master, or maybe he had just swept it under the rug. Jack Ketchum had vanished from the records, like he had never existed at all.

Except for the fact that the girl who had been Delia Bosque, turned Yellow, became Delia Ketchum as her stomach grew round when she was only 18. Yellow disappeared as much as Jack Ketchum had, or perhaps Red held onto Yellow in the way that Delia hung onto Jack.

When Delia presented her son – only a month younger than Samuel's own grandson, having been premature – as Ash Ketchum (not Ashton, Asher, Ashley, or any other Ash-something name, just Ash), he knew who the boy was and was honestly a bit shocked.

Samuel once asked Delia why she gave him that name. She just smiled like there was some joke he didn't understand.

Then tragedy hit in a way that Samuel had never experienced before. He had lost his wife to sickness when Daisy and John (or Blue, as he preferred) were only young, but it was nothing compared to losing both of his children in a single moment along with his daughter-in-law. The media said it was an accident, but he knew it was no such thing. Then Kene, Leaf's father, had vanished and Amanda Green had lost herself in depression, and he knew that it had to be connected.

Red had been silent throughout it all, and Samuel forgot about Ash for a while.

Then he found the boy who had once been his grandson's best friend (he didn't know how that break had happened) happily interacting with Pokémon in the woods at his summer camp in a way that many young kids didn't. In a way that many adult trainers couldn't, and he remembered then.

Professor Oak watched this boy grow with baited breath, sure that he was the boy he remembered. He certainly looked the same, with Delia's brown eyes, Red's black hair, and a dark skin-tone that was apparently inherited from Delia's long deceased mother.

When Ash was one of the children that became eligible to receive a Pokémon and leave home on the first of April after his 10th birthday, Professor Oak had been just as proud as he was of Gary (and Leaf too). He had not swayed or skewed anything.

Though he had held his breath when he found a Pikachu that had been harassed and attacked by his own kind. He had been angry and vicious until Samuel got him to just be annoyed and a bit cranky.

Samuel honestly forgot that there was a fourth child coming to get a Pokémon the morning of April 1st. When little Joey had shown up for his Pokémon, the professor's heart sunk with shame. His bias was showing so strongly. That was when he remembered that there was a fourth option. He still had that Pikachu. He kept it hidden from Joey, Leaf, and Gary. He knew Ash, and had a feeling he'd be late. Thankfully he was right.

Professor Samuel Oak had seen the world fall apart and rebuild itself more than once. He had seen the impact a peaceful world could have on a bright-eyed child who turned out to be far more special than little Sammy could have ever predicted. He had seen the hope, the future.

Now he was watching it crumble before them once again and there was nothing that he could do about it. He was too old this time, too feeble, and his knowledge of the bonds between trainers and Pokémon could only go so far.

He knew he should show trust in Lance, the G-Men, and everyone else, but he just couldn't. It was irrational, really, but his faith laid within Ash, Gary, and their friends. Even their recent advancements within Johto and Kanto had been more because of Bonnie, Max, Tracey, and Brock, than anything else, when he thought about it.

So he tried to put his skills in research to some use. He had seen Mirage Pokémon before. He had interacted with them in ways that others hadn't – having been corralled and held captive by them. Yet, no matter what he did or researched, he could not find a way to stop them and it was frustrating. Well, that wasn't entirely true. He knew fully well that Aura could disrupt the mirage system, though he had no idea how much Aura or effort would be needed to collapse this system if it was even possible. With so many unknown variables, Professor Oak kept that tidbit to himself. He was not going to be the one to reveal Ash's secrets to the world.

So he read and researched every possible link and connection to the point where he was physically exhausted, slumped over against the computer. It would surely wreak havoc on his spine when he tried to move later.

That was why he was right there to start awake when he got a sudden email. That was strange, since most communication still wasn't possible outside of highly secure email networks. His research was secure, but he couldn't reach out to others.

He was so tired that Professor Oak didn't even think when he clicked it open. It could have been malware to get into their system, especially since the sender was one he didn't recognize and there was no subject.

Giovanni is sending people to set up shop on Shamouti Island. Fully armed. They're waiting for something there, but are planning to strike at some point in the future.

Professor Oak blinked at the email in confusion before he suddenly thought back to vicious weather patterns, warring legendary Pokémon, and Delia's scream of terror when her son fell into the frigid, rough ocean. His heart sunk. There were already enough problems with Kyogre and Groudon gone (he suspected the fact that everything hadn't gone to hell was Rayquaza's doing), they couldn't risk disrupting the balance between the legendary birds.

Though he had faith in Ash and his friends, this was not something he could keep to himself. Professor Oak pushed himself to his feet, wincing as his back cracked, and went to go find Lance.

...

Bright green eyes stared at a tiny screen hesitantly, before he clicked the 'send' button and the message was gone. Quickly, he laid a special magnet on the side of the computer, feeling a bit bad that he was about to destroy something that belonged to hard-working business owners (not that they were really happy or free to do as they pleased anymore anyway). He heeded the computer's fried.

Once James was sure that he was alright, he got up and made his way out of the small internet café. He glanced around before spotting Jessie and Meowth across the street.

"Did you do it?" Meowth asked him. He was sitting on the ground, a bow around his neck pretending to be a normal Meowth. It wasn't exactly something he wanted to do, and made it clear

how unimpressed he was, but he also didn't want them to get caught.

"I did," James agreed, fixing the cap on his head. It was a bright, sunny day, so no one questioned the young man wearing a cap and sunglasses. "You think we're okay here?"

"I'm sure," Jessie assured him. She pressed her red lips together, brow furrowing in thought. Though she seemed calm, her blue eyes darted from side to side, looking at every person there. Her magenta hair that would have normally given her away was tied up beneath a wide-brimmed sunhat, which also shaded her face. One thing that she and James were oddly good at was blending in and being unnoticed, even if their costumes weren't that extreme. Even so, she wanted to be prepared. No one was going to sneak up on them if she had anything to say about it.

"And you're sure we're doing the right thing?" Meowth asked, almost skeptically, though both Jessie and James knew it was for show more than anything else.

"Yes," James insisted. This was his idea, and he was more than confident in his decision. "They need to know. Remember last time?"

Jessie shuddered as she remembered plunging down through the ice into the frigid water, and watching the Twerp go down not long after. She pursed her lips slightly. "It was always meant to be the Twerp, wasn't it?" They had known that there was something special about him and his Pikachu. That was why they continued to follow him as the baseline for the machines and traps they tested.

That boy just drew people in, good and bad alike, and they weren't sure whether that was a good or bad thing.

...

May sighed as she sprayed a blue number four onto the wall. It was the fourth tunnel that she and Leaf had gone down, and she was honestly getting tired. She thought they were lucky when the last tunnel led to a dead-end, but this one was proving her wrong. It twisted and turned, and she had the distinct feeling that it was all going downhill, so they'd have a fun time going back.

"Holy hell!" Leaf exclaimed as she came to a sudden stop. May peered over her shoulder and through the narrow opening that they had been heading towards. Leaf's flashlight illuminated the room enough to see that there was a narrow rock-bridge that led across a chasm that they couldn't see the bottom of. The room was huge, and it made a sick nervousness creep up in the younger of the two.

"We should just go back," May suggested, in an almost pleading voice.

Leaf looked ready to agree, but groaned in annoyance. "Knowing our luck the stupid shrine is on the opposite end of this. We should—"

Her sentence cut off as the part of the rock bridge she stepped on crumbled beneath her foot. Leaf screamed in surprise, and May yelped, dropping the spray paint as she grabbed the rock wall with one hand and Leaf's hand with the other.

Leaf hung precariously, one foot still pressed against the rock wall, but that didn't matter in the least. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest to the point where she was positive she could hear it outside of her body too.

Panic ripped through May when she felt Leaf's hand starting to slip out of her glove. For a moment, it wasn't a brunette teenager, but rather a green-haired boy dangling before her.

With a determined cry (and adrenaline pumping through her), May jerked back, managing to drag Leaf up with her. The two girls stumbled back into the safety of the tunnel, falling onto the ground.

"Holy shit," Leaf breathed out as she stared at the ceiling, her shaking hand still clutching the flashlight that she had never let go of. "Thanks."

May nodded her head and tried to voice that it was no problem, but the sickness in her stomach became too much and she lurched to the side, expelling the contents of her stomach on the ground.

Leaf was at her side instantly, rubbing her back. "It's okay. We won't go down there." She paused for a moment. "You saved me, May. You did that. You pulled me up, because you're strong. You understand?"

She did. She had always had the strength to save Drew, but the circumstances, and his choices, made it so she couldn't. It had been entirely out of her hands.

"It wasn't my fault." With those words, it was almost like something had been freed from her. No, it hadn't been her fault.

They knelt in silence for a few moments before May picked up the spray paint. "We should go do another tunnel then." She didn't want to, but they couldn't stop.

"If it's not down another one, we know where to look, right?" Leaf nodded towards the chasm. The two teenagers stood back up and started walking back down the tunnel.

...

Iris traced a bright red five on the wall as she and Misty walked, the red-haired girl holding the flashlight that was lighting up the area before them.

She wouldn't lie, she had been excited to be on the trail of the dragon orb. From the way Ash described it, it sounded like the essence of the dragon-type itself, which was confusing but very cool. She knew that types were man-made classifications of what was reflected in nature, and maybe they were just calling the orbs names like 'dragon', 'fairy', 'ice' and so on just so that they as humans could comprehend them. Who knew?

Now though, Iris wasn't very excited at all. In fact, she was almost bored. The tunnels she and Misty had gone down were fairly straight, not deviating, descending, or elevating at all. It was just a straight path surrounded by rock. Her excitement of seeing this dragon orb was definitely put off, and instead, her thoughts went to her own Pokémon of that type.

"Hey, Misty," Iris spoke up, causing the other girl to hum. "There's only five more including this one, right?"

"Yeah." She nodded, keeping her eyes on the area in front of them. "Only dragon and water left to find. We know where the others are."

There was something really poetic about that to Iris. A smile rose up on her lips. "Well, I mean, dragon and water-types are pretty badass. Best for last, right?"

Misty laughed, looking so unlike the girl that had broken down and cried the other day. Iris knew the pain was still there, but she was handling it better now, and that was a relief to see. The loss of her sisters was nothing to just push aside, even for the greater good.

"Hey, can I ask you something? One specialist to another?" Iris asked a moment later, not quite

sure how to word what she wanted to say. She still felt like her troubles and worries were nothing compared to those that the others faced, and was a bit ashamed that they bothered her so much.

"What's up?" Misty replied, glancing over her shoulder.

Iris hesitated for a moment, biting her lip a bit. Her shoulders slumped as she painted another number on the wall. "I...this sounds so pathetic, all things considered, but the thought of going after the dragon-orb, it just makes me think..."

"It's okay. Say what's on your mind."

She took a deep breath. "Did Ash ever tell you how I couldn't get my Dragonite to listen to me at first?" She wasn't at all surprised when Misty nodded. "Well, I never told anyone this, but my Druddigon gave me problems too. And we all saw what happened with Hydreigon. Do you think... maybe I'm just not cut out to train dragon-types?"

Misty came to a stop, and Iris almost crashed into her, but managed to stumble backwards in time. The redhead didn't look back as she spoke. "Iris, do you love your Pokémon? Do you regret training them?"

"Of course I love them! I'd never regret it!"

"Do you love dragons?"

"I do!" Iris nodded her head confidently. "I studied them all my life! It's been my dream to be a dragon-type master ever since I knew what it was! My parents trained dragons, and I don't remember them, but it...connects me to them, you know?"

"I understand that, trust me," Misty said with a soft tone. Both of her parents, along with the aunt that she was named after, had trained water-type Pokémon. It was part of the reason her father had noticed her mother in the first place, or so her grandmother said. "If all that's true, then yes, you're cut out for it." She turned to face Iris. "Dragons are strong, temperamental, stubborn, and yeah, even vicious. That doesn't mean you're weak by not getting them right away. Even Pokémon that look like dragons have those issues."

She crossed her arms in front of her, accidentally shining the beam of light coming from her flashlight in her face. "Look at Ash's Charizard. He didn't listen to Ash for the longest time because he was too strong and cocky, and Ash was too inexperienced. But you know, it wasn't Ash becoming a better trainer that changed things. He was always improving, that's true, but it didn't matter to Charizard. What did was Ash's dedication and love." She sighed. "I used to ask Ash why he didn't just swap Charizard out with a Pokémon that would listen, but he said that was exactly why. He loved Charizard, he never turned away from him, and that was what won him over."

"How about my Gyarados." Misty took one of her Pokéballs off of her belt and stared at it. "I was terrified of Gyarados since I was a little baby. That's a long story. My sisters left this one behind because they couldn't control him after he evolved. I was so scared, but I kept trying to work with him. He was in a cage and these...assholes were going to hurt him. I took a Tentacruel's poison sting for him when he was helpless, and then he saved me in turn. It wasn't my prowess as a trainer that won him over. It was respect and love. And Iris, I've seen you with your Pokémon. That's what drew them all to you. That's what made Hydreigon come back. So yeah, you are cut out to be a dragon-type trainer, because you say you're one. That's what matters and no one can take that from you."

Misty took a deep breath, and then her cheeks turned pink, like she was embarrassed about her

speech, but didn't want to lose her determined expression.

A laugh escaped Iris' lips. "You're awesome, you know that?"

"I try." Misty winked and they both laughed. "Seriously though, Iris, I don't think it's strange that you're worried about that. I think it's...great actually. It's like...you can see something bright beyond all of this and you still worry about it." She waved her arms around the tunnel they were in. "It's nice to think that there's still a reason to worry about those things."

"I never thought about it like that before," Iris admitted. "Well, I guess if it helps—"

"It does."

"—Then you're welcome?"

Misty smiled at her. "Come on, let's find this orb so we can get closer to worrying about the things that we should be worrying about."

Iris nodded her head, and the two continued on down the tunnel.

...

Walking down the stone corridor with Gary was actually pretty awkward for Cilan. It was easy to pipe up and respond to one another in group conversations, but Cilan had never really had any substantial, one-on-one conversations with him in the past. Not without another person to add something to it.

Armed with spray-paint and a flashlight, the two made their way down an ancient-looking staircase. They were careful, since it didn't look like it would meet any safety inspections at all, and Cilan was more than relieved when they got to solid ground again.

"It's strange to think that people had to carve things like this," he spoke up, motioning to the staircase. There was no need for Pokémon to create something like that.

"There are strange things all over that we haven't discovered," Gary acknowledged. "Maybe it's just because I'm from Kanto, and so much of our history, even fairly recent history, has been lost, especially in comparison to other regions, but finding things hidden like this really doesn't surprise me all that much anymore." He shined the flashlight on the wall, slowing down a little bit to look at the hieroglyphics that were carved into the smoothed stone. "Never ceases to amaze me though."

"Why these caves, why this far down?" Cilan wondered. He didn't really want to put any spray paint on this particular place. It had to be archeologically significant, and he didn't want to ruin that. "This place certainly has a strange flavor, but still."

Gary shrugged. There was really no way to guess without studying the area in more detail – finding clues about those that lived here long ago. He wanted to stop and look at everything in greater detail, but he knew that they had a job to do.

He came to a sudden stop when a certain patch of hieroglyphics. "Huh."

"What?"

"Can you hold this for a second and shine it on that thing right there?" Gary asked, and held out the flashlight.

Cilan took it, and pointed the beam and the symbol. It was strange, like a circle with a square around it, four slightly familiar Pokémon at the corners of the square, and writing around that. "What is it?"

"I could be wrong, but it looks pretty similar to something I saw in Hoenn while we were traveling." He had a little notepad out with a pencil, and was sketching it quickly. "I didn't get to sketch it that time, but I don't want to forget. Maybe after this is over I can come back and check them out. You know, compare and contrast."

"Do you think it means anything for us now?"

"You mean with Arceus? I doubt it. He's normally represented by the wheel around him or as his distinct Pokémon form. Never things like that. It's probably an ancient kind of Pokémon that died out a long time ago, that's all." He shoved the book away. "Sorry, I know we're in a hurry, but I didn't want to forget this time."

"Don't worry," Cilan assured him, passing the flashlight back. "There's nothing wrong with looking beyond the darkness and planning for a bright future." He thought about his brothers for a moment. "We just have to believe that things will turn out alright, and work towards that."

"You're right," Gary agreed as he started to walk forward, looking at the other symbols with interest. Cilan sprayed a three on the ground, so he could avoid ruining the walls but they'd still be able to keep track of where they were.

After all, they still had a mission to complete.

...

Dawn painted a green five on the wall. She yawned a little bit, still tired from the long trek there. They hadn't really stopped to sleep since Ambrette Town, though most of them napped on the trains. Once they got to Anistar City, it took a few hours to hike down to the Terminus Cave. They were on their fifth tunnel already, and Dawn kind of wanted to lay down and have a nap.

She glanced over at Serena, who seemed to be on the same wavelength as her, judging from the dark circles under her eyes.

Dawn shook her head, trying to keep herself awake as she thought of something to talk about. "You know, I really like the little bit of Kalos we've seen. I think I'd like to come back here and travel sometime maybe."

A soft smile appeared on Serena's face. "Well, if you ever do, I can show you around a bit. Maybe show you some Performances." She paused for a moment. "I'm really glad that Kalos is in such good shape too. I think we all needed it."

"Everyone seems so much lighter and happier here," Dawn said with a nod. "I mean, if we had been hit with those nightmares in Sinnoh after the prison invasion, or even in Unova, I think we'd be running a lot slower than we are right now. I'm still so impressed that you broke through yours."

"Mine was just...I saw my father and I know that he died years ago. I just...I've never even had a dream where he's still here, and I'm not sure what that says about me. I just knew he wasn't real."

"My mom was fairly young when she had me," Dawn admitted. "In her 20s, but still young. My... biological father didn't stick around. A one-night stand. I saw a shadow of him, I saw my mother blaming me for the fact that he left. For her career ending. For everything. I never even met my father but I couldn't break out of it. I believed it." She looked down. "You're so strong, Serena."

"You are too," the elder of the two assured her. "We all have our different strengths and weaknesses, right? I mean, look at you. You're this bright ray of hope when no one else can be. I couldn't even be that in the beginning. That's something to admire."

"It feels like a weakness to me," the blue-haired girl said sharply. "It makes me feel...stupid and naive even though no one calls me that."

"It's not stupid to want to see things in a positive light. Not at all." Serena thought for a moment before she smiled and laughed.

"What?" Dawn asked, tilting her head slightly.

The expression of curiosity reminded Serena so much of Ash, that it made her laugh again. She shook her head. "I stayed in school until I decided to become a trainer just a little over a year ago. One of the things we had to do once was memorize a poem that was pretty profound. I didn't really get it back then, not really, but I think I do now."

"Did you memorize it?"

"I did," Serena answered with a nod. She thought for a moment before she started reciting. "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. Your playing small does not serve the world, there's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." Serena glanced at Dawn's gaping face and blushed. "I don't remember who wrote it though."

"Wow, that's really...that does make a lot of sense, doesn't it? I guess that's what I was doing earlier, right? Being afraid of my own light. And...that's sort of what Ash does too. He's so afraid of his own power that he'd rather hide it than embrace it really." Dawn clapped her hands together. "Thank you for sharing that, Serena!"

"It's not a problem," Serena replied as they walked forward. She watched the younger girl put some more spray paint on the wall, and came to an abrupt stop.

She stared at the wall. Dawn stared at the wall. They looked at one another before looking back at the wall.

The spray paint had gone through it, but it certainly looked like there was solid rock there.

Dawn bit her lip, but then screwed her face up in determination. Serena made a strange sort of choking sound as she reached forward, as if that would help, but she could barely twitch before the younger girl's hand passed right through it.

...

Clemont glanced over at Ash, who was sitting with his eyes closed and his brow furrowed. He watched his friend, but didn't disturb him again. Earlier he had questioned what the other boy was doing, only to be told that he was trying to track everyone's aura. It wasn't an easy task by any means.

He stared at the screen as more and more tunnels and passages were mapped out. The Terminus Cave was far bigger than he ever could have imagined and it really didn't seem to have an end. There was no telling where the orb could be, and Clemont was starting to wonder if they had come

to the wrong place all together.

He saw movement out of his peripheral vision, and expected to see one of their friends coming back. Instead, what he saw was a small, mostly green Pokémon staring back at him.

His breath caught in his throat. He knew that creature. He knew it very well. That was the Pokémon that simply vanished on them one night, the one that had Bonnie in tears for weeks, the one that they just didn't talk about anymore in an effort to make sure her sister wasn't upset.

Clemont sprang to his feet, startling Ash and Pikachu. "What's wrong?" Ash called out, but Clemont wasn't paying attention to him.

Squishy turned and vanished down the tunnel, and without any form of thought, the blond boy ran after it, ignoring his friend's protests.

Ash caught up to him quickly. Even at his top speed, Clemont couldn't come anywhere close to outrunning him. Ash managed to grab his arm to stop him from running.

"Let go!" he cried out. "I need to—do you see what that is?"

Ash and Pikachu both looked around him, gaping with surprise. Pikachu jumped off of his shoulder and approached Squishy, muttering quietly to him.

"You left Bonnie," Clemont said, a bit more bitterly than he meant to. "She didn't – she wouldn't... you left her without even saying goodbye."

Squishy looked down before looking at Ash. Clemont followed the Pokémon's gaze, his eyes locking with his friend's. "Ash...did you—did you know what happened to him?"

Ash's mouth opened and closed, before his shoulders slumped and he sighed, nodding his head. "He's a form of Zygarde. Flare grabbed him, and I went after him. That's how I got involved in that whole mess. He couldn't come back at the end of everything. It was too dangerous, and Diantha made me sign all these things to keep quiet. I'm sorry."

In a completely uncharacteristic moment, Clemont could only picture how heartbroken his little sister had been, and he snapped. "What the hell, Ash? How could you—why would you...didn't you see how she acted? Didn't you care? I—I—you don't have a younger sister, you wouldn't get it, but still!" Ash said nothing, and the blond breathed heavily.

Then logic came back to him. He understood exactly why Ash had kept quiet. He would have too, no matter how much he wanted to insist that he wouldn't. He could also see how miserable the secrets made his friend. He had never wanted to keep things from them or hurt them. It must have ached like hell to actually be able to feel Bonnie's misery at the time and keep quiet.

"I'm sorry," Clemont sighed. "I—I don't like it, but I understand. I do. I just...Bonnie's my little sister. And I feel like all I do is let her down. I promised my mom. I promised her I'd keep Bonnie safe. I'm not even in the same region as her right now and we're in the middle of a war. She would be so much safer here."

"You do know how proud of you she is, right?" Ash asked slowly. "You're right, I don't know what it's like to have a little sister, but I do know that she looks up to you. You mean everything to her. She's safe right now, with your father. It'll be alright."

"I know. I know but...this is only going to get worse before it gets better and you know it. We have almost all the orbs, and then what? The Mirage Pokémon are still out there."

"Aura can break down whatever energy that is." Clemont had once theorized that the energy used was charged with the opposite of Aura. Ash always just thought that the opposite of it was just no Aura at all, but after a lot of confusion, he sort of understood. It was another energy, but negatively charged. Ash wasn't a big fan of physics or chemistry, but it sounded familiar. "I'll be damned if I let anything hurt her or any one of you when I can do something about it."

There was the Ash that he remembered. He inhaled and then looked down, pleased to see that Squishy was still there with Pikachu, watching the altercation with interest. "I don't suppose that you could show us where the orb is?"

Squishy made a sound and nodded, hopping quickly down the tunnel they had just came from. Clemont, Ash, and Pikachu ran after him, a bit surprised at how quickly something without feet could actually move.

They hurried after him until Clemont felt like his lungs were going to explode. Even after all this traveling, running and a lot of physical activity didn't really sit well with him.

So when they ran into Serena and Dawn, he didn't really have the coordination to move. He and Serena slammed into one another, tumbling over to a pile on the floor. Dawn skidded into Ash, but he managed to grab her shoulders to steady her.

"We found the orb!" Serena said before she could even untangle her legs from Clemont's. "It's just down—Squishy?" She blinked at the Pokémon and looked at Clemont. "What?"

"It's a long story," he answered.

"No it's not. Squishy is a form of Zygarde. We saw him. Asked if he could show us where to go," Ash said bluntly.

"Okay, no, there's definitely more to the story than that," Serena insisted, finally pulling herself up. "But we'll deal with that later."

After quickly introducing the Pokémon to Dawn, the four trainers and Pikachu followed the little legendary down the tunnel and through the illusion of a wall.

Ash came to a stop as the dragon orb's power overwhelmed his senses. The shrine was large and decorated with different Pokémon, some he didn't recognize. Slowly, Ash walked forward, his eyes locked onto the indigo orb within the shrine. He reached out, and when his finger's brushed the smooth surface, it started to glow.

He held it close to him and looked at the others.

Clemont smiled and looked down at Squishy. "Thank you. You should hide for now, just in case someone does come to try and get you—again. And if you have the chance, stop by and see Bonnie at least once after this is over, okay?"

Squishy nodded, and was quick to start hopping away.

....

Water. Fire. Ice. Electric. Those were the only orbs they had yet to collect, and they knew where three of them were.

The only problem was the water orb. Once everyone had gathered together again, exhausted from their trip and wanting to know what was going on, May had revealed her idea of Manaphy. It was

the most solid idea they had at the moment, but the problem came from the fact that they had no idea where the sea castle could be.

"We do know where three are though," Misty pointed out. "And they're surrounded by water. Maybe we'll get lucky and it'll be there. If not, well, we still get three orbs."

"Makes sense," Cilan agreed. "I can understand wanting to get everything else when they're safe, but in this case, there's no point."

"Right. We can rest up here, and then get Giratina to take us to Shamouti Island, right?" Leaf asked. Almost everyone nodded, but Ash had a far-away look on his face. "What's up Ketchum?"

He started a bit, but smiled almost bitterly. "It's just...that's where this sort of all began for me. That was the first time I even heard the words Chosen One. About me at least."

Laughter bubbled up from Misty, and she nudged him. "Still wish your mom had named you Bob?"

He regarded her seriously. "Bob Ketchum has a great ring to it."

"Well, at least you got one of your future kids named," Gary sniped sarcastically.

Ash stared at him blankly, and Misty gaped in horror. For a moment, the brunet thought he had gone too far, and then the girl snapped, "I am not naming my kid Bob!"

Gary was about to pick on the fact that she hadn't denied future children, just the name, but Ash quickly changed the topic. "I told my Pokémon that I felt more like the Frozen One rather than the Chosen One. I forgot about that until now." He wanted to see his other Pokémon again, even those that were away from him.

"One thing at a time," Dawn told him. "Orb first. Victory second. Pokémon third. Future children that I call dibs on being the godmother for fourth."

"What? No way!" Maybe they were all deliriously tired, but soon they were in a debate about who the godparents should be.

Ash just watched them blankly before looking at Misty, who seemed rather smug. She glanced up at him, and he said, "Let's just hope no one is messing with the legendary birds. We don't need anymore bad weather."

"Here's hoping," Misty agreed, turning her attention back to the debate.

Ash settled down and decided to just shrug it off and rest for a bit. He had Misty beside him, Pikachu on his lap, and all of his friends seemed okay for now. He'd take that little win, because soon he'd have to call Giratina again, and they would be almost at the finish line.

And that absolutely terrified him.

Chapter End Notes

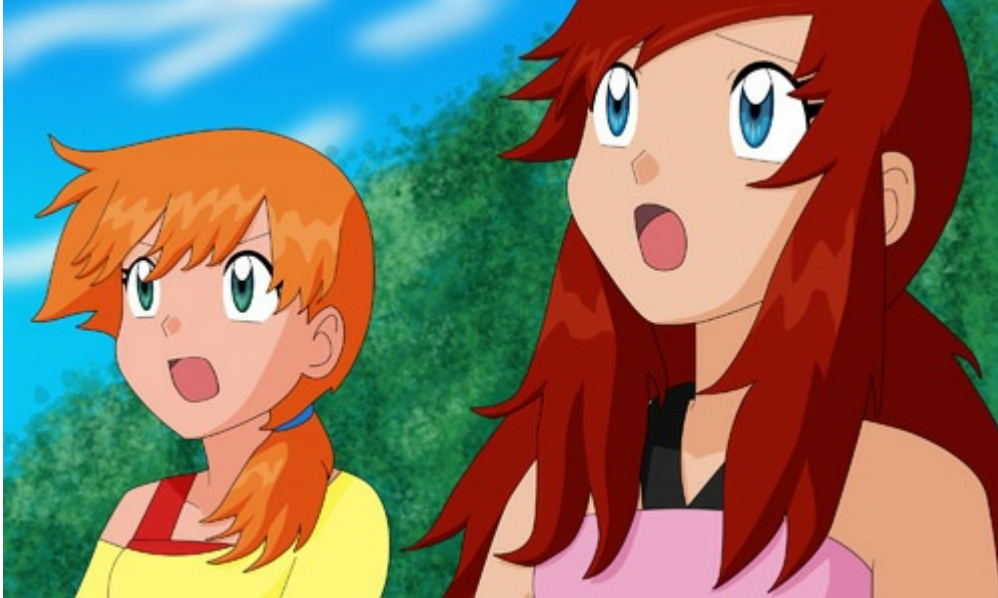
Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle
Edited by: EchidnaPower

In The Blink Of An Eye

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



When they first stepped into Kalos, they thought the warm air was absolute paradise. Now, standing on the shore of Shamouti Island, everyone realized that they were wrong. The sun was scorching in an almost pleasant way, the type of weather someone wanted while going to the beach.

Misty sighed as she knelt down in the white sand, relishing the feel against her knees, but simultaneously relieved that her red boots were too tall for the sand to get in. There was nothing worse than trying to run around with sand in your shoes. Well, there was, she mentally acknowledged, but it was still terrible.

Ash stood beside Giratina, rubbing the gentle Pokémon's head. He muttered something quietly, and the Pokémon took to the sky, blasting a portal into the water before disappearing. They all really owed Giratina, since he made life so much easier on them.

Misty didn't want to think about how they could have possibly gotten from Sinnoh to Unova, to Kalos, and to the Orange Islands, without her.

"Giratina wishes us luck," Ash said as he came up beside her. He jumped when Iris let out a tiny shriek, looking at her with alarm.

"Sorry!" She blushed so hard that it was visible on her dark skin, something that didn't happen often (much to her pride and relief). She kicked a little bit of the water at Cilan and glared at him. He sheepishly held up his hands in surrender. "Water's cold and I wasn't expecting it."

"I thought we were being ambushed or something," Gary said as he ran his hand through his spiked hair and looked around warily at the thick trees and foliage. "There are a lot of places for people to watch and hide here." His eyes darted to Ash. "I assume the same thing goes as before? It's a bit hard to feel anything beyond the orbs."

"Sorry," was the only thing the black-haired boy could utter.

"The Orange Archipelago has long been associated with Kanto, almost like an extension of it," Leaf said, pursing her lips in thought. "There's a chance Team Rocket could already be here, especially since the legendary Pokémon are here." Leaf knew that, for legendary Pokémon, Articuno, Zapdos, and Moltres were fairly common, so to see the Alphas would be something else all together.

"So we probably shouldn't just wander into the middle of the village," Clemont clarified, and Leaf nodded at him.

"People on this island are superstitious about a lot of things. They're pretty welcoming, but who knows how they'll react to us now," Misty said thoughtfully, remembering back to the first time that they were on that island years ago, just before Ash went on to defeat Drake and become the Orange Island Champion. That thought settled in her mind, and she didn't want to get distracted, but she couldn't help it. Her eyes darted to Ash. "We're in your region right now."

Ash's brow furrowed as he tilted his head in confusion. Pikachu jumped up from where he had been lounging on the sand and muttered quietly to him. "Oh! Yeah, I guess. I mean, I told Drake that I wanted to travel so I couldn't be the official Champion here."

"Though if anyone ever actually beat him, you'd have to fight them," she pointed out. He just shrugged in acknowledgment. He wasn't actually sure if that was the case, but didn't want to really talk about it.

"Anyway, we need a plan," Gary interrupted. "Clemont, can you bring up a map of the area around here?"

The boy knelt down, putting his laptop on top of his bag so that it wouldn't get any sand in it. He typed quickly before saying, "Alright, got it."

Everyone crowded around as best as they could. May frowned a bit and said, "We're going to need something to get across the water with."

"Gyarados or Blastoise could work," Dawn suggested.

"I don't know. If anything here is being monitored, some people sitting on a Pokémon is going to catch a lot of attention. A boat from someone that lives here would be better." Clemont rubbed the bridge between his glasses.

"Where do we find that?" Serena questioned, frowning a bit.

Everyone was silent, until Leaf groaned. "You are not going to make me steal a boat."

"Well, could you hotwire one?"

"I don't know? Maybe? Probably?"

"Hold up," Misty interrupted. "What if we just asked someone here?" That caught everyone's attention. "I'm fairly sure there's at least one person here who knows how to operate a boat and would help us out. I can go find her since we already met."

"If anyone is recognizable here, aside from Ash, it's you," Cilan pointed out to her.

Of course, he was absolutely right, but that was still a risk they'd have to take. She frowned, and then shrugged. "Alright, so a couple of people can come with me." Her eyes darted to Ash, who

looked like he was about to protest. "And yeah, it has to be me. You are staying out of sight."

"I...could go talk to Slowking," Ash said slowly. "Just so he knows what's going on and why we're here, taking the treasures and all." He still didn't look all that comfortable with leaving her though. He knew she was strong, stronger than most, but that didn't mean that he wasn't going to worry.

"I'll go!" May volunteered, holding her hand up in the air.

"Me too," Cilan offered. "Safety in numbers, right?"

Misty nodded at the two of them. She looked at the others and pointed down the shore. "We'll walk through the interior to the town. You guys stick close to the beaches and get to the shrine Slowking guards. It's a pretty decent place to hide out, at least." She remembered being told that people didn't really go up there outside of the Chosen One's Ceremony once a year.

"Once we can get there, we can just chill for a bit, right?" Dawn whispered to Serena, trying to keep her voice down. The older girl snorted and shrugged. It sounded like a good idea to her.

Ash grabbed Misty's hand and squeezed it. She smiled reassuringly at him and said, "I got this."

"I know." He let go of her hand and nodded.

"Look after him, Pikachu," Misty told the Pokémon as she led the way on the path that led away from the beach. Pikachu saluted her.

The rest of the group waited until the three of them were out of sight before continuing on down the beach.

Neither group noticed a tiny trail camera come to life as they walked by.

...

May really tried to act casual, she genuinely did. At this point, they were all so paranoid, that it wasn't really a surprise that she found it hard to relax when she knew that they were back in Team Rocket territory. That being said, the only thing that really looked out of place was her and Cilan. Both of them were continually looking in all directions, scanning for any dangers that may approach.

Misty glanced over her shoulder at them and groaned. "Seriously? You guys look so twitchy and nervous. Stop it. You're going to get us locked up for suspicious behavior or something."

"Aren't you nervous?" May asked her.

"Well, yeah," Misty admitted as she turned around to face them, walking backwards. "But we need to do this, right?"

Cilan sighed and nodded his head. "You're right. We're being a bit ridiculous. If anyone's watching this island, they'd know that we're here by now. We took detours in Kalos, but I guess here going straight ahead is probably the best idea."

"Now you're talking!" Misty said with a nod of her head. Her exclamation startled an elderly couple that were walking by them. Both of them shot her a rather ugly look. "Sorry."

"Son, don't you think you're a bit overdressed?" the old man said, turning his attention to Cilan. Misty and May both blinked and looked around at their older friend. He was dressed like normal, in

his black dress pants, green vest, button-up shirt, and tie. It was a completely Cilan look, but the old man was right, it stood out like a sore thumb on a tropical island like this one.

At least the two girls looked the part, Misty with her crop tops and shorts, and May with her t-shirt and jeans.

"Oh, I always dress like this," Cilan answered, an easy aura of charm exuding from him. "You never know when you're going to run into a gentleman and his lovely lady."

May looked at Misty and mouthed the words, 'Oh my Arceus.'

Misty snorted in the most undignified way, earning another glare from the apparently proper old lady.

"I don't suppose you could point us in the right direction?" Cilan asked, a large smile across his face. "My friend here says that she has a friend that lives on this island." He motioned to Misty.

"Oh, who is that?"

"Her name's Melody," Misty answered with a sweet smile. "She has really dark red-brown hair, blue eyes, and plays the ocarina."

"I know who you're talking about, girl," the woman said, eyeing Misty with distaste. Giving up the pretense of being friendly, the redhead glared back and crossed her arms. "What do you want her for?"

"She's an old friend," she answered through gritted teeth.

"Please?" May asked, clasping her hands in front of her and widening her eyes. "I've heard such good things about her and I'm so looking forward to meet her." She had absolutely no idea who they were looking for, but no one else needed to know that.

Apparently the younger girl could warm her way into the old grouch's heart too. The man pointed down a path, while the woman gave a couple more detailed instructions, before continuing on their way.

"Nice," May teased, nudging the older girl.

"Oh, whatever." Misty looked at Cilan. "That sounded more like the Cilan I met before." He just smiled and shrugged.

"So, we're looking for someone named Melody?" the younger girl asked as the three of them started walking again. Most of the paths on the island were made of the same soft sand as on the beach, causing them to kick it up as they moved until they got on the pressed-rock roads.

"Melody Birnbaum," Misty answered. "We met her the first time we were here. She helped us a lot last time with Lugia. I kept in contact with her via email for a bit, but it's been a while since then." With everything that was going on in her life, it was difficult to stay in touch with anyone, and that was before Team Rocket messed up everything.

"So she won't turn us over to Team Rocket or anything?"

"If she tries, I'm throwing her into the ocean." May giggled, but then realized that Misty was entirely serious.

"No," Cilan said sternly. "If we have to steal a boat, we're not angering the locals beyond that."

The redhead visibly ignored them as they finally came up to a simple wooden home that looked like nearly everything else that they'd seen so far in the residential areas, if not a bit bigger. That made sense, because if Melody and her older sister played such important parts in their celebration, they must have some significance.

Not really caring about that, Misty walked right up to the door and knocked without any form of hesitation. Cilan and May hung back at the bottom of the stairs, both once again glancing nervously around the area. There were still lots of places they could be ambushed from.

They heard footsteps in the house, and the door flew open to reveal a girl wearing a pink crop top with thick black straps. She was wiping off her sunglasses before glancing up at who was at the door. "What no—" Her sunglasses dropped to the ground, blue eyes going wide as her mouth fell open. "Misty? What are you doing here? Your face is all over the news as wanted!"

"We need your help Melody," Misty answered, getting straight to the point. "You remember what happened years ago? Well what's happening now is basically that on steroids. This is May and Cilan, two of my friends that got dragged into this mess."

"And Ash?"

"He's here too." Misty was not about to actually say where anyone else was, just in case they were being watched.

Melody furrowed her brow before saying, "Like what happened before on steroids?"

"Three legendary birds against Lugia, completely messing up the ocean currents, is going to look like nothing. Unless we stop it. Almost the same way as before."

"The same..." Melody trailed off and looked to the ocean, where she could only see Fire Island off in the distance from their position. "Do you always just drop in on people like this?"

"Yes," Cilan answered.

"Pretty much," May said at the same time.

Melody sighed and turned to slip on her sandals. "Alright, but give me the cliffnote's version on the way to wherever."

...

"You okay?" Leaf asked Ash as he came to a stop. He was staring at the ground just below a large set of stone stairs that curved upwards.

"Yeah," he answered in a muted voice, slowly looking up the stairs. Pikachu shifted on his shoulder and patted his cheek gently, understanding.

This was exactly where he woke up after plunging into the sea. After Pikachu desperately kept him above the water so that he wouldn't drown. After Misty threw herself into the icy water to find him. After Tracey almost got pulled in by the currents dragging Misty a couple times. When he first woke up, he had been so goal-oriented that he had simply shrugged off his friends and what they had done for him. He had thanked them all later while he and Misty were tucked under a ton of heated blankets and his mother was hovering over both of them, but it never seemed like enough.

"Pikapi?"

Pikachu broke Ash out of his musing, and he slowly started walking up the steps. He remembered this part too. They had been covered in ice and for every one step he had climbed up, he slipped back two. Shrugging off Misty and Tracey had been sheer stubbornness on his part, and a bit stupid, in retrospect. Pride did funny things to him at times, but he knew better now.

He knew that he'd be nothing without his friends.

Getting to the top, a familiar, large shrine caught his attention briefly before his eyes slid to the Pokémon waiting at the top of the short staircase that led up to the stone platform.

"Slowking," Ash breathed out as he walked forward, vaguely aware of his friends following him.

"Ash," Slowking answered in his deep, slow voice, nodding his head. He looked behind the boy and at his friends. "We're missing a few, aren't we?"

"It sounds like you were expecting us," Gary said, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

Slowking just hummed a bit as he walked down the stairs. He looked from one person to the next, and everyone had to agree that there was something uncomfortable about his knowing gaze. Slowking were known to be intelligent, but there was something else behind his eyes.

"You've come for the treasures. Do you have all the others?"

"No," Ash answered, shoulders slumping a bit.

"I don't suppose you'd know where the water one is?" Dawn asked hopefully as she knelt on the soft grass and pulled off her boots and hat, wanting to give herself a bit of a break.

Slowking seemed more amused by her actions than anything else. He eyed the young girl and shook his head. "No. I do not. I have faith you'll find it though." He turned to everyone else. "You all seem quite weary. Take a seat for a moment while we wait for your friends."

Iris, Serena, and Clemont slumped to the ground beside Dawn, all stretching out in different positions.

Serena leaned back a bit and watched as Ash walked towards the shrine and up the steps. Pikachu had jumped off his shoulder, but still followed him closely. For a moment, she could picture his excited cry as he realized the water orb had been in there all along, but he didn't do anything, he just stared.

"Ash?" Gary called up to him as he and Leaf came to the bottom of the stairs.

Ash leaned forward, looking through each of the openings and able to see Fire, Ice, and Lightning Islands very clearly. There were no horrific storms and raging legendary Pokémon yet though, so that was a bit of a relief.

He bit his lip when he heard something shuffle up beside him. He didn't need his Aura or even to see to know who it was. "Did you know, back then? That I was the big Chosen One? Not just...a one off deal?"

"Yes," Slowking answered with a solemn nod. "I thought of telling you, but you were so shaken up by the prospect of being the Chosen One for one prophecy. You were far too young for that burden. You're still too young."

"Lugia must have known too then."

"They all did. They all knew who you were." Slowking bowed his head. "The legendary Pokémon knew when you were born, and Ho-Oh looked in on you when you first stepped into the world on your own."

The flash of a golden Pokémon flying over a rainbow rushed through Ash's mind. Everyone had told him that he made it up, and a part of him honestly believed it in retrospect. "So, I really did see Ho-Oh that day." His shoulder slumped. "I really never did have a choice, did I?"

"Of course you did!" Slowking cried out in shock, startling him. "You made the choice to go out to the island. History has been destroyed and rewritten in the past because Chosen Ones have made the choice to not act. Chosen Ones have done the right thing by stepping back. It might be hard to believe right now, but it's up to you what you do and who you are." Slowking patted his back. "It's just unfortunate for you since you're the first actual Chosen One since Damos. There have been chosen champions for legendary Pokémon since then, but you're the first. Perhaps the world would have been a better place if that wasn't the case, but there's no point in questioning the past."

Ash looked over his shoulder and down at Gary and Leaf. He then glanced at Pikachu, who smiled at him. "I guess not."

Gary hesitated before he walked up to Ash's side. The other boy looked at him and Gary said, "Let's be real, if it wasn't you we'd probably be screwed. Who else is selflessly hard-headed enough to do what you do?"

"I don't know, it sounded like you just described yourself."

Leaf snorted and shook her head, staring at her two childhood friends with amusement. She raised an eyebrow as Ash suddenly looked towards the stairs.

"Misty!" Serena called out, startling everyone sitting with her. The blonde girl waved as Misty appeared at the top of the stairs, waving back at her.

May and Cilan kind of slumped up the last of the stairs, both gasping for breath, while the other girl with them just seemed really amused as she walked around them.

"Are you okay?" Dawn asked as May stumbled down beside her.

"She said that she knew a shortcut," May gasped, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. "She didn't mention that it was a ridiculously steep hill mostly made of sand. I think my lungs are going to burst." She flopped forward, into Dawn's arms. "Hold me."

Dawn laughed and patted the girl's head, but let her stay there as she turned her eyes to Cilan. "You okay?"

"I don't think I'm really dressed for this environment," Cilan said sheepishly as he sat between Clemont and Iris. He took off one of his shoes and dumped a surprising amount of soft sand on the ground.

Iris snorted.

Melody's eyes looked around at the people that waited by the shrine. She was very familiar with the place, having come up to spend time with Slowking many times over the past few years. What she wasn't familiar with was a lot of people being up there. Part of her expected to see maybe Ash and Tracey, but none of the faces were familiar.

Then Ash leaned around one of the pillars that surrounded the shrine. A ghost of a smile appeared on his face as he came down and walked over to her. "Hey, Melody."

She glanced up at him and pouted, "The hell? Since when are you tall?" He shrugged and smiled again, but it was one that didn't really reach his eyes. Though it had been years since she had seen him, Melody still knew enough to see that he was trying to force himself to seem cheerful.

Then again, being the Chosen One when Team Rocket was taking over couldn't be any kind of fun.

Casting a quick glance at Misty over her shoulder, a sly smirk appeared on Melody's face. Without warning, she kissed Ash on the cheek and said, "Always getting into trouble, honestly. Hi Pikachu." She reached up and scratched the Pokémon's ear when he climbed up onto his trainer's shoulder.

Misty's cheeks turned red and she glared at Melody, who just grinned back. Honestly, the tiny bit of jealousy that sparked up in Misty surprised even her. She knew there was no reason to be jealous, so it couldn't have been because of Ash.

She'd just settle on being a tad annoyed with Melody in general. She liked the girl, she did, but now Misty remembered how she could push and prod.

"Hey!" Dawn cried out. "Leave him alone!" Serena matched her unimpressed glare.

"You have an entire defense squad now I see. So, what do you need little ol' me for?" Melody asked, flipping her hair over her shoulder and winking at Gary, who flushed. Leaf elbowed him.

Without speaking, Ash glanced at Pikachu, who turned around and unzipped his bag, digging for something. "Chu." He turned back and passed a beige orb that started glowing brighter when Ash held it, as opposed to it just being very close to him.

"A treasure!" Melody cried out as she leaned in close to look at it. She snatched it from his hand, not even acknowledging that the glow faded. "Where'd you get it?"

"Johto," he answered, taking it back from her. They both watched the light begin to dance within the confines of the glass. "There's one for each type. We're almost there. We need your help to get some of the last ones."

"You're not surprised it stopped glowing for you?" Clemont questioned from where he was sitting.

"No." Melody shrugged. "Ash is the only person the orbs ever lit up for that we know about. I just assumed it was a Chosen One thing. Though I think being rude and not introducing me is a Kanto thing, right?"

Ash's cheeks went red and Misty rolled her eyes. She pointed to each person in turn. "You met May and Cilan. Iris. Clemont. Serena. Dawn. Leaf. Gary. Everyone, this is Melody. She helped us the last time we were here." She raised an eyebrow at Melody. "Happy?"

"Thank you, Misty," she replied sweetly. Melody turned around and looked back at Ash again. "So, you want to go get the treasures, but why?"

There was a heavy silence before he asked, "Would you believe that Arceus told me to find them so he could use it to stop Team Rocket?"

Melody blinked a couple times, staring at him like he was the strangest thing she had ever encountered in her life.

Then again, given how laid back life was on Shamouti Island for the most part, he pretty much was the strangest thing she had ever encountered in her life. "Why not just fly or swim? Someone here must have Pokémon that can do that."

"You're oddly accepting of this," Iris said.

At the same time, Gary answered, "We'd attract attention that way. No one's going to notice a local boat go around those islands."

"If you don't we're going to have to commandeer one anyway," Leaf added, though she really wasn't looking forward to it. She wasn't even sure if she knew how to hotwire a boat. Though Clemont probably did. He was a bit scary like that.

"I kind of want to see that," Melody said with a laugh. She put her hands on her hips as she stared at them. "Knowing the way things work you'd end up with mine anyway. I'll take a couple of you." She put her finger to her lip. "Maybe Ash and Misty, since they met these legendary Pokémon before. They can get a bit touchy over...everything."

Ash looked around at the rest of his friends. Though they did have an easy time getting through Kalos, he could still see dark circles of exhaustion under their eyes. They all deserved a break. He nodded his head but then looked at Misty, "You can stay, if you want."

"Oh no, I let you go alone last time and we all saw how that turned out," Misty replied dryly. Ash kind of wanted to ask her if she meant the time that Melody's boat got tossed onto Fire Island, or when she had to save him in the ocean. Wisely, he decided to keep that question to himself.

"Jealous," Gary said between coughs.

"I will shove you off that cliff." Misty pointed at the steep drop to the ocean.

Ash completely ignored his friends and turned his attention to Pikachu instead. "You ready to go?"

The Pokémon nodded excitedly. Even his Pokémon were excited that this was almost over. He could feel it radiating from their Pokéballs. He couldn't blame them. He wanted to see all of his other Pokémon and he was sure that they did too. They wanted to be able to come out of their Pokéballs more and to train like normal.

"We'll be waiting here!" May called out as Ash, Misty, and Melody made their way to the steps.

Ash gave her a thumbs up before turning his attention to the stone stairs. He was about to walk down when he froze. He thought about his excited Pokémon again, and looked around the area. It was secluded and peaceful. They'd be okay there.

He tossed his Pokéballs into the air, startling everyone as Ria, Charizard, Sceptile, Garchomp, and Greninja appeared. "I'm heading over to the islands with Pikachu, Misty, and Melody. You guys relax here for a bit, okay?"

Charizard took in their surroundings and snorted, a small burst of flames coming from his nose. Ash could feel how unimpressed he was.

"Don't worry," he assured the Pokémon, patting his arm. "Ria will be able to sense if anything goes wrong, and you and Greninja can come, okay? Just...enjoy the sun for a bit."

It took a little while to convince the Pokémon, but eventually they all agreed to stay and enjoy being out of their Pokéballs for a while. In contrast, Misty chose to keep all of hers since they

would be incredibly useful on water. Once that was sorted, they continued on their trek.

Melody led the decent. She stayed focused on the area in front of her so that she wouldn't fall, but that didn't stop her curiosity. "So, your friends seem nice. A little quick to jump at me kissing you. What was that about?"

"Serena and Dawn are just good friends," Ash said with a shrug.

"They are," Misty agreed and pointed at Melody. "So of course they were going to call you out for kissing my boyfriend."

"Seriously?" Melody snorted with amusement. "You're kidding, right?"

"So you believe that we're on a mission for Arceus, but not that Ash is my boyfriend?" Misty raised an eyebrow.

Ash groaned. "Everyone always thinks it's made up. Iris did. Cilan...kind of did. Dawn did. Serena did. Bonnie did. Clemont did. Seriously. Am I that hopeless?"

"Yes," Misty said, and Pikachu nodded in agreement. Ash pouted at them.

"Actually," Melody spoke up in a sing-song tone, "I was thinking more about you, Miss Denial. You were more likely to punch me in the face before admitting you had a crush on him." She laughed and waved her hand, showing that she was joking.

Ash put a hand on Misty's shoulder, and she took a deep breath before nodding at him. Misty knew Melody, they were acquaintances, and she knew that she was only kidding.

When they got to the sandy ground, Melody turned around and winked at her. "But even then, he had you, didn't he?"

"Ash is never really alone cause he's got me."

That startled Misty a bit at first when she heard her own voice in her head, or what she assumed was her voice. A smile passed over her features. "Yeah. Always been my burden, always will be."

"Thanks Mist," he replied dryly at her use of the word burden. Misty just laughed at him and nudged him.

"You two are adorable, it's disgusting," Melody joked. She flicked her sunglasses down over her eyes again. "Anyway, at least you're here on a nice day. We never know if it's going to be sunny or stormy anymore. I'd rather not go through a wicked storm like last time."

"You and me both," Ash admitted as he looked up at the sun. Frowning a bit, he took his hat off of his head and placed it on Misty's. She blinked up at him and he shrugged. "You're already burning."

Melody made a dramatic cooing sound, prompting Misty to roll her eyes.

Surprisingly, they got very little attention from the other locals when they got into the town and made their way to the docks. A couple people waved at Melody, but then went on their way.

"Here we are!" the dark-haired girl said as they approached a boat that definitely wasn't the same as the one Ash remember.

"Oh! It's beautiful!" Misty gushed, clapping her hands together excitedly. "Is this just yours, or

your sister's too?"

"This is my baby," Melody replied, patting the side of the boat before climbing on. "She's called the Island Princess."

"It's a perfect name!"

Ash followed Misty onto the boat, but looked at Pikachu with confusion. He pointed at the two girls, and the Pokémon simply shrugged, not understanding either.

Ash and Misty took seats up at the bow on the cushioned seats while Melody untied the boat from the dock. She hurried up to where they were and brought out her keys to turn it on. "Alright, which one first? Fire and make our way from there?"

"Might as well."

"Alright. Hold on. This baby goes fast!" Melody cried out, winking at them. "Really now, the only things we need are a storm and your other friend. What was his name? Tracey?"

"Tracey, yeah." Misty nodded, her smile fading a bit as she thought about the older boy that had to have been mourning her sister as much as she was, maybe even more. A part of her felt like she should be with him, like they could help one another in ways that other people couldn't.

She glanced at Ash out of the corner of her eye as they started to cruise across the water. She was just thankful that she didn't have to feel exactly what Tracey felt.

Though that made her wonder what he was doing at that moment.

...

Tracey frowned and rubbed his eyes. He swore that he'd probably need glasses after all of this staring at a screen.

As more and more Gym Leaders and G-Men reappeared, coming even from other regions in secret, others that technically weren't G-Men were pushed into more mundane jobs. It made sense in a way, since he technically was a part of the G-Men, but he wasn't an active agent. Nor would he ever want to be.

His artistic talents apparently translated to things like mapping and observation, so he was stuck going through a massive list of communication logs to find patterns. Why they couldn't actually use the computer to search, Tracey had no idea, but there he was.

At least it was a nice distraction.

Slumping back in his seat, Tracey slowly slipped his cellphone out of his pocket. It was a useless relic, deactivated so that it wouldn't be tracked. He was given a new one, but he kept his old one with him at all times.

He clicked onto the pictures, and the first one that came up was a selfie of him with Daisy. His eyes trailed over the woman's face, nausea rising up in him as he stared at her sea green eyes. He clicked onto the messages that were still left behind, where she had been double checking when he could get up to Cerulean. Tracey also knew that there was a voice message there, one he dared not listen to. He wasn't sure he could hear her voice and keep doing the job that he needed to do.

That was his driving force. Tracey needed to do something productive to help against Team

Rocket, if only for Daisy alone. Then he thought about her sisters and unborn nephew; he thought about all the innocent people that had been killed. There were many reasons to keep going.

He sighed and kept looking through the logs, not quite sure what he was looking for.

Maybe it was a sudden boost in motivation thanks to his thoughts of Daisy, but Tracey noticed something that he hadn't before. He looked back at some things he had skimmed over before, and came to a startling revelation. He pulled up different messages and read them carefully.

"They're all from the same person," he muttered, staring at the messages. He was no linguist, but he just knew that the writing came from the same person. The voice in all of them was the same.

There was a mole in Team Rocket.

Then the screen blinked as a new message popped up. Quickly, he directed the mouse to the message and clicked it. There was no title, and the email was unfamiliar, but it wouldn't have gotten through the extensive firewalls if it was dangerous.

"There's an OP going down on Shamouti to get a target," Tracey read aloud, a thrill of fear rushing through him. He knew that it meant that some sort of operation was happening on Shamouti Island, and that was a bit terrifying. He could remember what happened the last time someone messed with that tiny part of the world very clearly.

Then he noticed it. It was just a small line of green beneath the cut of the email, but it was something to check out. He scrolled down, and his stomach dropped.

There were several pictures, obviously taken from either people spying from the trees, or perhaps trail cameras, but he recognized the people on all the pictures. Ash, Misty, Leaf, Gary, Clemont, Serena, May, and who he was sure were Dawn, Iris, and Cilan from descriptions alone.

"Oh Arceus," Tracey breathed out when he saw the timestamp. He looked at the digital clock on the computer and realized they had been taken about an hour ago.

He jumped up from his chair, causing it to slam into the floor, and he ran. Tracey couldn't remember the last time he moved so quickly.

He didn't knock when he burst into a meeting room. Lance glanced up at him, whatever he was trying to say dying on his lips. There were some Gym Leaders, some Frontier Brains, some Elites, and some other government officials in the room, but that didn't matter to Tracey. He was on a mission.

Without explaining himself, he rushed to the front of the room and logged onto the correct the screen to bring up what he saw. "Team Rocket knows where they are."

Lance was scowling, and was about to reprimand him (Tracey realized belatedly that there were other Champions on the monitors around the room) but the Kanto-Johto Champion froze. He took a step towards the screen, his eyes focused only on Ash in the group of people. "Someone sent this?"

"Just now. Those pictures were taken about an hour ago."

"Fuck," Lance swore, startling everyone. He spun around and said, "Get a team together and find the fastest helicopter we have. We need to get there now."

"Why?" Karen asked, raising an eyebrow.

"At the very least? We need to get this boy before Team Rocket does," Lance answered, pointing at Ash.

"Ash Ketchum," Cynthia spoke up from the monitor she was on. "He was here not too long ago."

"Benga reported him in Unova too," Alder added.

"Hoenn as well," Wallace said.

"He thinks he was being subtle around Kalos, but I got him on a cam here only a couple days ago," Diantha said while frowning. "How is that possible?"

"I'm not sure, but he's definitely on Shamouti Island, and we need to get him now," Lance insisted.

"Yes, we get that, but what's so special about this kid?" Will, one of the Johto Elites, asked. "We can't risk redirecting resources now that we know we can get into the heart of Kanto."

Lance knew that was true. They had confirmed that the tunnel came out, ironically, underneath the Game Corner that had been used as a Rocket base when Madam Boss was in charge. No one would see them coming.

"Because we're still running under the assumption that Red is alive," he replied, pink eyebrows narrowing. "If he is, he hasn't talked about any of our systems or secrets. Giovanni would have screwed us over otherwise." His eyes looked around the room, and to the monitors. "What's the best way to get someone to talk?"

"Torture," Cynthia said simply.

"Well, that's one way. Some people still don't crack." Lance shook his head. "You use family. It's a lot easier to handle physical pain compared to listening to someone else. That's why we need to get Ash." He glanced over at Tracey before looking at the screens with the Champions. "Wouldn't you spill your secrets to save your child?"

"Are you—are you saying..." Wallace trailed off.

Tracey thought for a moment before the realization of what Lance was getting at shot through him like one of Pikachu's thunderbolts. There was no way...

"Ash Ketchum is Master Red's son," Lance confirmed.

Tracey's mouth fell open. He had the feeling that everything just got a hell of a lot more confusing.

...

"This is not Fire Island, Melody."

"Oh shut up. You guys are distracting. So what if we came to Lightning Island first?"

Ash ignored the two girls, his hands shaking slightly from nerves. "Get a grip," he whispered to himself. "You've done this before. You're okay." He hated feeling so shaky.

He looked up the long set of stairs that went up the mountainside, knowing that Zapdos would be waiting up there. Ash felt Pikachu pat his cheek, and he slowly started to ascend.

"Hey! Wait a second!" Misty called out, realizing that he was getting ahead of them. He felt a quick rush of fear when she realized how steep the steps were, and that one wrong move could be

disastrous. That didn't stop her from running up to him though. Ash gave her a confused look, but kept going.

"What was that? He would have been fine," Melody asked as she caught up.

Misty didn't know how to say that a tiny part of her was still very nervous about the idea of leaving Ash up on a place where it would be so easy to fall – accidentally or on purpose. Outwardly, he seemed to have climbed out of his extreme low, no longer on the knife's edge of something horrible. She knew no one got over depression or whatever presented with PTSD so quickly, so she still worried. That wasn't her story to tell though, so she just shrugged. Let Melody think she was the clingy, over-protective girlfriend (which, admittedly, she was for a while), it was better than divulging into Ash's current mental state without his permission.

After a little while of climbing, that wasn't her only problem though. Her calf muscles burned, and she was sure that her knees were locking every once and a while. "Ugh, I don't remember this many stairs last time."

"We didn't use the stairs last time," Melody pointed out between huffs. She seemed to be having an even worse time. That didn't stop a Cheshire Meowth grin from appearing on her face. "At least we got a nice view from here." She nodded towards Ash.

"Melody!" Misty squawked, causing the other girl to erupt into laughter. She calmed down quickly enough, but it only took one look at Misty's red face and she was gone again.

Ash looked down at them, raising an eyebrow as he watched Misty shove Melody a bit, literally growling at her. He looked at Pikachu, who just shrugged, and they continued on their way.

Even Ash felt a little out of breath by the time he got to the top of the stairs. He took a deep breath, and waited there for the two girls.

"Pi Pikapi?" Pikachu asked, climbing off of his shoulder and jumping on the ground. "Pikachu cha pi pika!"

"I am not out of shape," Ash grumbled to the Pokémon. "You just had it easy because I carried you up. You're walking next time." Pikachu waved him off, because they both knew that wasn't true.

"This is the tallest island, right?" Misty asked, but at Melody's sympathetic expression, she turned to look at the one next to them. She groaned when she realized that Lightning Island was easily the shortest of the bunch.

"You can wait at the bottom you know," Ash said, not wanting either of them to get hurt, by something else or themselves. "I—" He tensed up and turned around, looking up in the air.

His Aura might have been tipping him off that something was there, but Misty and Melody could feel the static in the air all of a sudden. Slowly, the three of them walked forward, towards the shrine that had been in ruins the last time any of them had seen them.

Ash looked up towards the sky, and held his arm out to stop the two girls. A quick glance up told them why. Perched on top of the cliff that surrounded the shrine, with lightning rippling across his course feathers, was Zapdos.

The Pokémon flew into the air, and instead flew so he was standing atop the shrine, narrow eyes focused directly on Ash.

Ash gulped, feeling a cold sweat at the base of his neck. Slowly, he walked forward. "I don't want

you to start fighting again."

Zapdos looked at Pikachu, and suddenly unleashed a stream of lightning on the little Pokémon. Ash heard Misty and Melody gasp behind him, and he was very close to throwing up an Aura Shield to protect his friend, but then he remembered.

Pikachu stood up and stared at Zapdos. He fired his own lightning towards the other Pokémon in response, and Ash really wished that Meowth was there to translate. However he knew lightning-speak, it sure was helpful back then.

After a few exchanges, Pikachu nodded and turned to Ash. "Pikapi. Pi Pikachu cha pika pika chu pika ka chu Pikachu pika pika."

Ash blinked at that, shame rising in him as he looked at Zapdos. "No, we didn't find the Water Orb yet. But we will. I know we're running out of time for whatever Team Rocket's planning. We're trying."

"What's he saying?" Misty asked him.

"Zapdos was hoping that these were the last ones we had to get," he answered. "Pikachu told him no, and now he's being cranky." The Pokémon screeched angrily. "What? You are!"

Zapdos narrowed his eyes and then pointed towards the shrine with his long, spark beak. Ash made his way towards it, staring at the familiar yellow orb. It was so strange, really, because unlike the other ones, he had held this one before. Sure, he had met Mewtwo and Mew before coming to Shamouti, but he didn't know that at the time. As far as he had been concerned for the longest time, this was the first time he had really put his life on the line for the world.

This orb, along with the other two, were originally what sparked his Aura to life for the first time too.

He reached his hand out, fingers wrapping around the glass. He felt a small wave of static electricity run through him as the light started dancing within it, and looked up towards Zapdos. "Did you know it was me? When I was here the first time?"

Zapdos nodded his head.

"And you still tried to take me out?"

Zapdos shrugged his wings slightly. There was no regret on his face, and that was a little disconcerting. Ash stared at him dryly, wondering why legendary Pokémon that knew he was there to help always made his life difficult.

"Ash," Misty called out, though she kept her voice low. He glanced at her over his shoulder. "We should go to the other islands before it gets too late. That way we can actually just sit with everyone else for a bit."

"Right." He looked up at Zapdos again. "You should leave here until things settle down. Who knows what Team Rocket might do." The Pokémon eyed him suspiciously. "I'll tell the others to go too! I swear!"

Zapdos cawed and lifted into the air, returning to his original perch. He nodded towards the stairs, a clear motion for Ash to get going. He sighed and turned away, looking at the two girls. "So, next island?"

It was a lot easier going down the stairs than going up, but they all had to be careful not to slip and fall. There were a couple close stumbles, but they still managed to reach the beach and headed towards the boat again.

"Okay, if that's all you're doing, I think I'm going to sit the next island out," Melody said as she turned on the engine of the boat again, steering it towards Ice Island. "I thought there'd be some sort of excitement." Ash thought it was a bit of a strange statement since most people found seeing legendary Pokémon up close exhilarating without anything else going on. Then again, she lived right by them.

"What are you going to do?" Misty asked her curiously, pushing her bangs out of her eyes as the boat picked up speed.

"Work on my tan, duh." She waved at them carelessly. Misty rolled her eyes and shook her head, though there was an amused smirk gracing her lips.

Once they got to Ice Island, Ash and Misty climbed out as Melody sat back, stretching out in the sunlight.

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" Ash asked her, holding out his arm for Pikachu to jump onto.

Melody waved her hand. "The top of those stairs are pure ice. I don't feel like falling, thanks. Good luck!"

"Are they really pure ice?" Misty asked as they started to head to the interior of the island.

"Yeah, I kind of forgot about that," Ash admitted, scratching his cheek sheepishly. He looked up the stairs that they were approaching. "I didn't walk up these last time."

"How'd you get up there? Charizard?"

"No, actually, it was Team Rocket."

Misty's brow furrowed and she pursed her lips as they started walking up the stairs. Her eyes looked towards the top of the winding stairs. "As in Jessie, James, and Meowth?"

"Well, definitely not Cassidy and Botch."

Her face scrunched up. "I thought his name was Birch?"

Ash shrugged, not particularly caring. "Doesn't matter. Anyway, yeah, I had no idea what they were doing, but they put a propeller on a boat and used it like a hovercraft to get across the ice and up the stairs." At first, he smiled at the memory, but then he frowned.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu asked, leaning to look at his face more.

"I'm okay," he insisted, shaking his head a bit. "I just...they were with Lugia, Pikachu, and I as we started back to Shamouti Island. They let themselves fall into the water so that we could pick up speed." His shoulders slumped. "They were willing to sacrifice themselves for me. For everyone. I just...this whole take over, killing people, killing and injuring Pokémon, it just doesn't fit them."

Misty thought about that for a moment. "They were criminals."

He shrugged. "You know what I mean. Sure, they could be awful people at times, but when it

really mattered, when it came down to it, they had good hearts. I could feel it." He placed his hand over the left side of his chest. "They never once told anyone about my Aura. And they've always been really creative and inventive on the spot. I just don't think they're bad people. They're just... lost."

Misty lowered her eyes to the ground, her hand slipping into his as they got to stairs were a bit of frost on them. "I guess...I get that. That's how Team Rocket gets people, right? Maybe I would have ended up like that. We saw it in Hoenn and on the way to Sinnoh."

"You're right," he agreed, squeezing her hand. "Where does that leave us? Do we have to punish everyone who puts on one of their logos? Do we just...lump them all together as one enemy? Jessie, James, and so many others, they wear those red Rs or other letters but they're not bad people. They never were."

Misty paused, causing Ash to stop so that she wouldn't stumble. She reached forward and put her hand on his cheek. "You won't decide that."

He blinked at her words, because she was right. Sometimes he forgot that he wasn't going to be the one to make all the big decisions in the end. There were a ton of politics behind what was happening. He just wanted to prevent the actual disaster itself, to protect the Pokémon. That was his job. The political fallout wasn't.

Ash was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn't even realize he walked face-first into a branch that leaned over onto the stairs. He spluttered, and Pikachu jumped over to Misty, who was desperately trying not to laugh.

Ash glared at the branch, specifically the flower that assaulted him. This made Misty's laughter bubble out as she reached forward and picked it. "Don't blame the flower."

"You can't stop me." It was amazing how something like that could instantly change the heavy mood, and honestly, he was glad for it.

Their ascent became much slower as they walked onto the icy stairs. Luckily, these were blocked on both sides so they wouldn't pitch off and down to the ground far below, but that didn't make it easy. They had to move very carefully, and Misty quickly realized that the thick soles of Ash's boots gave him a much better grip than her thinner ones did, so she held onto him as they walked.

"We didn't die," Ash pointed out as they reached the plateau. He felt a wave of annoyance that didn't come from her, him, or Pikachu, and tensed up. "Yet."

Articuno hovered in the air before them, tiny ice crystals falling with every flap of her wings. She glared at them fiercely.

Ash had no idea what they had done to annoy the Pokémon so badly, but he didn't like it. Pikachu jumped to the ground in front of them, eyes narrowed and ready to fight, while Ash kept his gaze on the legendary. If she came at them, he was going to protect them the best that he could.

"Oh wow," Misty breathed out. She was aware of the danger, but she couldn't stop herself. She hadn't seen Articuno this close up last time. Her eyes slid across the blue and white feathers that seemed to sparkle in the sun. "She's beautiful."

Articuno tilted her head slightly, and before anyone could move, she started forward. Ash yelped as she knocked him over, twisting around and circling Misty, coming to a stop in front of the startled girl.

Misty was careful not to step back, not wanting to stomp on Articuno's tail that was on the icy ground around her. She ought to have been scared, but she wasn't. Articuno didn't seem annoyed anymore, in fact, she just seemed curious.

"Go get the orb," Misty said, keeping her eyes locked on Articuno's. She heard Ash protest, but just repeated, "Orb."

Slowly, Ash walked by Articuno, but the Pokémon didn't pay him any mind. Instead, she cooed a bit and looked at the flower Misty still carried with her.

Misty held up the pink flower. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Articuno regarded it curiously, before breathing cold breath onto it. Misty watched with fascination as glittering frost appeared on the flower. "Wow. That's even better, thank you." This seemed to please the Pokémon immensely, and Misty was starting to wonder if the Pokémon just needed some more attention, that's why she seemed so cranky.

"Got it. You okay?" Ash asked her as he came back, eyeing Articuno a bit warily. He could feel the difference in her attitude already.

"Yeah, we're okay here. Look." She showed Ash the flower, subtly nodding at the Pokémon that suddenly regarded Ash with interest.

"It's really nice. Much better now." Articuno ruffled her feathers, pleased by his statement. That just made him more confused than anything else. He glanced at Pikachu, who shook his head.

No one ever said that Pokémon had to make sense.

...

"Okay, so the currents move water all over the world, like underwater rivers?" Dawn repeated, looking at Cilan curiously.

"That's about right," he agreed with a nod. He was sitting with May and Dawn, overlooking the ocean. "What's neat about this area is that all the currents connect here. That's why some people refer to them as the beast of the sea."

"So that's why, if something goes wrong here, it goes wrong really bad, really fast?" May asked.

"Right," he said. "Groudon and Kyogre dying made a mess of things, but if these legends go down, you can say goodbye to any sort of predictable weather."

"I remember that, years ago, when the weather went crazy," the brunette said, leaning back on her arms as she looked at the sky. "Honestly, it made me even more afraid of the idea of leaving home."

"I remember it too," Dawn added, staring down at the clear water below. "Who knew it had to do with Ash, even then?"

"I'm just going to assume that every wild thing that happened had to do with Ash. Most of the time, we'll probably be right."

Cilan chuckled at the two girls. "Well, it's a good baseline to start with at any rate."

"So, all the currents run by here? As in, they go all over the world?" Dawn asked, wanting to

clarify what he meant.

"This water branches out to all corners of the world in one way or another," Cilan answered. He loved sharing knowledge with people who seemed just as curious.

"Huh, well that's neat." She looked up at the sky, a thoughtful expression on her face.

Gary glanced up from the paper map in front of him, looking at the three for a moment. He wasn't sure what they were talking about, but he kind of wanted to yell at them to do something productive. There wasn't really much they could do though at the moment. His eyes turned towards where Iris, Serena, and Leaf were talking to Slowking, up on the shrine.

The Pokémon were all lounging and playing in the sun. That in and of itself was a heartwarming sight to see. If only he could really enjoy it.

His shoulders slumped and he fell forward onto the map. "I can't think of a single place where the Water Orb might be, outside of eliminating all the places we've been."

"Well," Clemont started, eyes focused on his computer instead, "if May's right, and it's in Manaphy's temple, I thought maybe looking for strange patterns in currents or strange sightings would work. There's nothing though." He pushed his glasses up so that he could press his fingers into the corners of his eyes. "How do we find a little orb when most of the world is water? For all we know, it's off in another random region."

"I think one of the legendary Pokémon would have told us," Gary replied. "Giratina, at least."

"That leaves Kanto then," the blond said instantly, bringing up a map of Kanto. "The Seafoam Islands, maybe?"

"Could be. An Articuno is said to live there too."

"But it wouldn't be an Alpha, because the Alpha is here. So it wouldn't be protecting anything."

Gary pointed at him. "True, but the Darkrai wasn't an Alpha. It just tried to do an Alpha's job."

"And failed." Clemont glanced at him over the top of his glasses. "That probably spread. They all seem to know what's going on somehow. So I doubt it's that Articuno. There could be another one maybe?"

"Maybe Articuno, Zapdos, or Moltres will tell us, or give us a hint," the brunet groaned. "What's taking them so long?"

"We don't want to attract attention, so it's not like they can fly up. That's a lot of stairs." Clemont motioned to the island. "They'll be back soon though. Give it a few minutes."

"A few minutes?"

He nodded towards the ocean. "There's a boat coming from that island there."

Gary twisted around to see a small boat flying across the ocean. Relief rushing through him. If they were coming back, that meant that it was almost over.

They just needed to find the last orb.

...

Ash held onto his hat as Melody pushed the boat harder across the ocean than before, eager to get back to Shamouti Island. It had flown off Misty's head, but his quick reflexes saved it from a watery grave.

The most difficult part of their trip was honestly getting away from a cooing Articuno, though she had seemed offended with him when he told her to leave for her own safety.

Moltres was a blessing. The Pokémon had been excited to see them, let them get the orb, and nudged them on their way. There was really nothing else to tell about that.

Ash decided that he liked Moltres best.

"So, are you guys going to just go, or hang around for a little bit?" Melody asked curiously as she started to slow down. They were drawing nearer to the docks, and she didn't want to hit them.

"We'll probably take a break for a little bit, but then go...somewhere." Misty sincerely hoped that the others had found some sort of clue as to where to go, since there was nothing around any of the shrines, and the legendary birds had been unhelpful as to where the last orb was.

"I was thinking, you're probably all hungry and could use some of our island food." Melody winked at them as she pulled into the docks.

"That would be awesome," Ash replied, getting up to help her tie the boat to the dock properly. He hopped onto the dock easily, Pikachu mimicking him. Though he didn't have to, he still held out a hand for Misty to take, helping her off. "I'm going to get these back to the others. You coming, or hanging with Melody for a little bit?"

"I'll go with her to help with this food," Misty said, pecking his cheek. "You get back there and stay out of sight."

"Yes, mom," he replied, saluting her, before hurrying away. Pikachu laughing and bounding after him.

It was strange, Ash thought as he ran with Pikachu by his side. It was so nervous about the fact that they had all but one of the orbs that Arceus tasked him to find, but he was also relieved. He knew that Yung was creating a Mirage Arceus, but with no mentions of it in the news anywhere, it gave him the hope that just maybe they would be okay.

The Mirage Pokémon were really all that Team Rocket had going for them, according to the channels that sided with the Pokémon League.

He hurried up the steps towards the shrine, and just barely made it to the top before he was tackled. Ash yelped, but then laughed when he realized it was Garchomp.

"Easy, you're too big for this," Ash laughed as he rubbed the Pokémon's muzzle, scooting out from under him. The others gathered around him, all appearing relieved (but still too cool to show that they were super concerned). His Pokémon were ridiculous, and he loved them all.

"You got them?" Iris asked as she bounded over to them. Her eyes flickered to the stairs. "Where's Misty?"

"She's with Melody. They're bringing back some local food." He managed to get up, and swung his backpack off of his shoulders. He moved to a clear spot on the grass, and opened the bag, reaching into it one at a time until every single orb that they had was on the ground before him, all with lights dancing through them.

"Wow, look at that," Leaf said, awe in her voice. Though she didn't have Aura, she could still feel the powerful pressure exuding from the orbs. She couldn't imagine what it was like for Ash.

"Gives me a headache," Ash said, squinting a bit at them. Each orb was a powerful presence on their own, but together they were blinding. "Any luck on the last one?" He started shoving them back into his bag.

Gary groaned. "We were hoping that one of the legendaries would give you an idea."

"No, nothing on the shrines either," he answered, zipping up the bag. It didn't really help, and he knew that it was bothering Ria too, from the way she kept looking away from it. "Ria, why don't you find Misty for a bit? Get away from these."

"Are you sure?" she asked, eyeing him worriedly.

"I got all these guys here." He pointed at Charizard, Sceptile, Garchomp, Greninja, and Pikachu. "I'll be fine." The fact that she gave in so easily, bounding off to find Misty, showed him just how much of a headache the power from the orbs was giving her.

"So, nothing?" Clemont asked again. Knowing what he was talking about, Ash just shook his head.

The frustrated looks on most of their faces made Ash's spirits sink a bit. He knew there was nothing he could have done, but it was still a bit disheartening to know that he couldn't bring back anymore information. They had absolutely no idea where to go from there.

"Okay, we'll keep combing over as much data as we can. If we all work together, we might be able to figure out something," Cilan spoke up. He practically spun to his bag and pulled out a detective hat, shoving it on his head. Iris groaned a bit at this, shaking her head in disbelief.

A very small smile appeared on Ash's face at his friend's enthusiasm. He looked from one person to the next, his smile falling when he realized someone was missing. "Where's Dawn?"

"She went that way," May said, pointing around the other side of the cliffs. "There's a path that way. Don't worry, she's fine."

"Her Pokémon are all here," Ash pointed out. He knew that they were safe, but still, why would they let someone just leave after everything that had happened? Deciding that being safe was better than being sorry, he started toward that side of the island. "I'll go get her. Be back in a minute. Pikachu, watch the bag." Pikachu nodded at him, and he hurried away. It would be nice to get away from them for a bit too.

Ash half expected a narrow, rocky ledge, and was pleasantly surprised to see that it was wide and split, half going down to the beach, while the other half went up to a higher plateau. He saw a flash of pink up there, and figured that's where Dawn had to be.

He quickly walked up, coming to a stop when he saw his young friend standing by the edge of the cliff, the wind blowing her hair back and forth. She was clutching something to her chest, shifting back and forth nervously.

"Dawn?"

She jumped, and looked around at him. "Ash! Don't scare me like that! When did you get back?"

"Just now. Sorry." He walked up beside her. "What are you doing? You shouldn't be on your own."

"Well, I'm not now, am I?" she replied with a cheeky smile. He sighed, a small smile appearing on his face. She looked back to the ocean. "Cilan said that all the ocean current in the world meet here."

"They do," he agreed.

"I figured that, well..." She opened her hands, and it took Ash a moment to realize what he was looking at.

"Those are the seeds Shaymin gave you."

Dawn nodded eagerly. "I've been trying to think about where to put them for a long time now. No where seemed right until Kalos, but even then, it just wasn't where they were supposed to go. But then I figured, why not let fate or destiny or whatever decide? Maybe some seeds will end up in the bottom of the ocean. Maybe there will be more than once gracedia garden in the future. I just thought..." She shrugged.

"It's a good idea," Ash encouraged her, clapping his hand on her shoulder.

Dawn smiled, but then squinted at him. "You okay?"

"Yeah, sorry. It's just the orbs. I can feel them from here still. I can barely feel your aura and you're right here." He motioned towards her. "I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

He nodded. "You going to let those go?"

"Oh! Yeah." Dawn took a deep breath and then tossed the seeds into the air, watching them twist and turn in the wind. Some people might have thought she was making a bad choice, since surely they'd all just end up in the depths of the ocean, but Dawn was sure she did the right thing. It felt right to her, and she wasn't about to turn away from that feeling.

...

"There hasn't been a single orb in Kanto, but that was where the temple was last seen, so maybe it is there," Leaf said, jabbing her finger at a paper map. "It's really the best that we've got at this point."

"So what do we do? Travel all the coastlines and hope that Ash can pick up on it, when he can barely feel anything close to him right now?" Iris asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Getting into Kanto in the first place is going to be hard," Serena pointed out. "They had people at the borders early on. Now that the league is fighting back, I bet it's even worse."

"We have nowhere else to go," Gary spoke up. "We don't know where this orb is. Ash has no idea. All we can do is guess. We can extrapolate that it's probably Manaphy that's guarding it, and because of that, it's in the sea temple. The sea temple was last seen in Kanto. No orbs have been found in Kanto yet. That's the only lead that we have at this point."

"What do you think, May?" Clemont asked the young teenager.

"Me?" she seemed startled by the question. "Why would—"

"You knew Manaphy. You had a bond with him—her—whatever, right?" Gary asked.

"Yeah."

"Do you think Manaphy might make it easier on you and go to somewhere you know?"

"I never thought of that," she admitted. "Maybe. I—do you guys hear that?"

Everyone, including all of the Pokémon, fell silent, as they listened carefully.

"Is that a helicopter?" Iris asked, blinking with surprise.

...

How startled Melody was when Ria appeared would be a memory Misty would keep for a long time. The smaller than normal Lucario was eager to help them carry back the food that they had collected, though she didn't actually say that, keeping her telepathy under wraps.

Still snickering over it a bit, Misty almost bumped into Melody when the other girl came to a sudden stop. About to tease her, Misty's smile vanished when she saw how narrow Melody's eyes were. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't recognize those people," Melody said, speaking slowly and unsurely. "Well I do, they're tourists that showed up a few days ago, but they just...bolted. It was weird, and you said to be on the lookout for weird things."

"Yeah," Misty replied, her stomach sinking a bit. "Maybe we should—"

"Misty!"

She whipped around at the familiar voice, her eyes going wide as she saw who was running towards her. "Tracey? What are you doing here?"

"Where's Ash, and everyone else?" he asked, trying to catch his breath.

"Back by the shrine. What..." She trailed off when she saw other men and women in suits appear, her eyes widening when Champion Lance himself appeared. "Tracey?"

"Melody, get back inside, and tell everyone else to get inside," Tracey instructed her, though it came out as more than a desperate plea.

Melody looked like she wanted to argue, but chose to listen, turning and yelling at others around her to get inside as she started to run.

"Tracey, what's happening?" Misty said, desperation rising in her voice.

"Team Rocket knows you're here, Miss Waterflower," Lance said as he came up to them, eyeing her disapprovingly. "Where are your friends? They're in danger."

The containers of food that Misty was holding tumbled to the ground. Ria abandoned hers and started running back to where she had left her trainer. "The edge of the island, by the shrine. Follow the Lucario."

"Tracey, keep her here," Lance instructed, and turned to the people that came with him.

"What? No! I—let go of me, Tracey!" Misty tried to run, but the older boy grabbed her arm. She seethed at him, and wondered if he knew how easily she could toss him over her shoulder if she wanted to.

"There's nothing you can do."

"Is that one of ours?" Someone called out, pointing upward.

Misty and Tracey both looked up to see a black helicopter swooping down towards the other side of the island, and Misty's stomach plummeted.

"Shit," Lance cursed, and that was enough of an answer for everyone. "Find those kids, now!" The G-Men agents ran towards the other side of the island.

"Sorry," Misty said to Tracey as adrenaline kicked in. Before he could ask why, she managed to twist his arm, causing him to yelp and let her go. No one else was able to grab her to stop her from taking off towards her friends.

...

Different colours of aura swirled in Ash's vision, making it difficult to focus on anything else. That was why he didn't feel the presence behind him until the person was almost on top of him. He felt the intrusion when they got close enough to his own aura, and in realizing that it was not one of his friends, he tried to turn around.

Pain exploded in his head as something hard was slammed into it. Everything swam in front of him, but he could clearly hear Dawn scream.

There was an enemy. Someone had hurt him, but more importantly, they could go after Dawn. Though it hurt, he forced himself to look up, just in time to see someone grab Dawn around her middle. She kicked and lashed out as much as she possibly could, while screaming and yelling so that everyone else could hear her.

Pulling himself together, Ash reached out to generate a shield, when a hand slammed down onto his arm. He cried out, and his wrist probably would have broke, if it wasn't for his Mega Ring taking more of the blow. The black surface cracked under the pressure, the keystone rolling out of the destroyed item.

Dawn sounded like she was underwater when she screamed his name, or maybe he was, he wasn't sure. He tried to push himself up, but cried out when something sharp was stabbed into the back of his neck. He slumped forward, and felt someone grab him, dragging him from the ground.

"Ash!" Dawn screamed. "No! Let go of him! Let go of me!"

"Take her too. She might be good for keeping him in line."

Ash wished that he could do something, but he felt so numb, like he couldn't use his own limbs. He was vaguely aware of something heaving him up, and landing on a hard floor. Dawn was thrown in after him, and he got the sickening sensation of rising up in the air far too quickly.

A person leaned over Dawn, and she slumped to the floor, unconscious. Ash tried to say something, but he couldn't even move his lips.

All he could do was close his eyes.

...

Dawn's scream startled everyone, especially the Pokémon. While the trainers processed, Dawn and Ash's Pokémon both charged towards where their trainers were. Ria seemed to bound out of

nowhere, heading for the top of the cliff.

A helicopter with a bright red R on the side rose up into the air before any of the Pokémon could get up to the trainers. Charizard roared angrily, and was about to fly after it, when someone fired warning shots at him.

"Get down here!" Leaf yelled, spurring into action. "Getting shot won't help them!"

Charizard snarled viciously, but understood. He came back to the ground, eyes focused on the helicopter as it took off over the ocean.

Misty appeared at the top of the stairs, eyes wide and looking every bit as panicked as they all felt. "Ash? Where's Ash?"

"He was up there with Dawn!" May squeaked out, pointing above them. "Do you think they were both—"

Misty didn't wait for the question, running as fast as she could to get to the top, slightly aware of others following her.

There was no one up on the plateau May indicated, and for a moment, Misty wanted to scream at the girl and ask her where they really went. Surely they were just somewhere else.

Then she saw it on the ground. The (thankfully) small pools and drops of blood. There had definitely been an altercation there. A very quick one, if she saw right.

"Misty!" Someone else called her name. It wasn't Tracey this time, but that didn't matter. Her eyes were drawn to something else on the ground, causing her heart to fall.

She stumbled forward, kneeling on the ground as she picked up the multicoloured keystone from the ground. A sob wanted to rip out of her throat when she saw the distinct, broken mega ring. It was definitely Ash's.

Ria hissed angrily beside her, Charizard snorting with rage, and that was just those two. Misty didn't need Aura to feel the seething hostility coming from all of Ash and Dawn's Pokémon.

A hand landed on her shoulder, and Misty almost flipped that person over her shoulder, but when she turned, she saw familiar spiky brown hair, brown skin, and narrowed eyes.

"Brock," she breathed out. He must have shown up after she ran from Tracey.

"Misty. It's okay. It'll be okay," he tried to assure her.

Hearing the words of the young man she always looked up to as an older brother broke something inside of her. Tears came rolling down her cheeks as she launched herself into his arms, gripping his shirt tightly with one hand as the other one held Ash's keystone to her chest.

"They took him, Brock. Him and Dawn. They took them."

"I know, I know. We'll find them," he assured her, rubbing her back.

Everyone else stood in complete shock and disbelief. It took not even a full minute for everything to flip upside down. They hadn't even realized there was a threat before it was too late to do anything.

"Guys," Clemont spoke up, his voice shaky and hesitant. "I don't want to be the one to bring this up

but..." He held up Ash's backpack as everyone looked at him.

"What about it?" Iris asked him.

"The orbs." Clemont's voice cracked as he spoke, but he didn't care. "If Ash is away from them for 24 hours..."

"They vanish," Gary breathed out in horror.

24 hours from the moment Ash walked away from them. Only 24.

Then everything that they had done, all of the sacrifices, would be for nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Interconnected

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Misty was livid. Her cheeks were stained red, her face twisted into a scowl that seemed almost permanent. One of her hands was curled into a fist, resting on the denim of her shorts, while the other one was the only relaxed part of her body, carefully stroking the fur on Pikachu's head between his ears. Pikachu was just as stiff as her, eyes narrowed and mouth in a deep frown.

She was sitting on the ground, her back resting against Charizard's warm side. The large Pokémon was also glaring at everyone, snarling at the oddest moments, but there was also guilt too. He could have tried to fly after the helicopter, even though it surely would have ended with his death.

None of the other Pokémon blamed him, of course. Sceptile was leaning against a tree, his arms crossed. Greninja was pacing back and forth. Garchomp was digging at the ground and growling at everything. Ria was completely still, her expression blank and her eyes following the same person as Misty and Pikachu's.

Absolutely no one wanted to get in their line of vision, almost visibly recoiling when looking at them. Dawn's Pokémon that had crowded around May and Serena didn't look any more pleased.

Misty didn't normally like being ignored, but at that moment, she was furious. Shrugged off because she was a 'child' and not to be taken seriously. They were the ones able to sneak in and out of regions when Lance and his precious G-Men were stuck in Johto, and they were able to do it without Giratina (who was a serious help but the point still stood). They were the ones that had the key to stopping the madness that plagued the world.

He just shrugged off her desperate insistence that they had to go after Ash and Dawn right then and there. It was certainly his plan to get Ash back, but he didn't have the same urgency she did.

"They tracked the helicopter," Clemont said as he came over to her, nervously sitting beside her almost cautious. He kept his voice low. "It's already back in Kanto. Celadon City."

"Celadon City?" Misty repeated slowly. "What's there?" She almost expected to hear that they had gone to the Indigo Plateau or to some random place in the middle of nowhere, not Celadon City of all places.

"Not sure, but they don't know that I know." His eyes darted. "I hacked into their communication frequencies."

Misty nodded, sea-green eyes turning up to where Brock and Tracey were talking rapidly and quietly. She knew that they had been working with the G-Men all this time, maybe they themselves were G-Men. Despite this, Misty had little doubt that, if she asked, they would back her up.

She nudged Pikachu gently, and the little Pokémon looked up. She nodded towards the two young men, and Pikachu climbed up onto her shoulder. Throwing a quick smile at Clemont, she got up and headed over to where Brock and Tracey were. She could feel the eyes of Ash's Pokémon on her, and knew that they were counting on her to find information on their trainer.

At least she knew that they'd be on her side even if no one else was.

"What's in Celadon City?" Misty asked as she stepped up beside Tracey and Brock. Both men jumped at her sudden appearance.

"Celadon City?" Tracey's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"That's where they took Ash."

"How do you – you know what, I don't want to know." Brock shook his head. He knew Gary, he knew Cilan, and he had heard about Clemont. Between them, and what he heard about Leaf, he was sure that they could have got the information somewhere. "Celadon..." He suddenly looked at Tracey. "Isn't that where she said there was an old Rocket base? A big one?"

"She did," Tracey answered slowly. "Underneath the Game Corner." He frowned. "The tunnel Max and Bonnie found. That goes almost right to it."

"Who said there was a Rocket base? What tunnel?" Misty and Pikachu's identical scowls made it obvious that they were very unhappy with both men playing the pronoun game and being so vague.

"Madame Rocket," Brock said after a moment of thought. "She's Giovanni's mother and the former leader of Team Rocket." At Misty's surprised expression, he held up a hand to stop her from talking. "She's been in a secret prison all this time. Pretty much since just after...well...a few years after your Aunt was murdered." He had half a mind to tell her that Madame Rocket had calmly told them about how she had set out a hit on Misty's aunt that had been killed, but decided not to. There was no point adding more fuel to the fire. "As for the tunnel – apparently Mew showed Max and Bonnie where it was. An ancient one that goes right from Johto into Kanto."

"Of course she did," Misty said dryly, in reference to Mew. Why didn't the legendary Pokémon just help them directly like Giratina did? That made her think. She wondered if she could get Giratina to help them somehow.

No, that was too risky. Giratina helped them so much and didn't deserve to be put into danger.

"Pika!" Pikachu cried out, pointing at the league helicopter furiously. There was no need for Aura to understand what he was feeling. He wanted to go, and he wanted to go now.

Misty slowly brought her hand up and opened it, revealing Ash's keystone. There was no saving the mega ring, but at least they had this. "We need to get to him as soon as possible. Tracey, you remember the treasures of fire, ice, and lightning. We need to get them and the others to Ash, or they'll vanish back to where we found them and it'll all have been for nothing. Everyone who helped us, all the sacrifices...Drew...Ritchie. We need to get to Ash and we have less than 24 hours to do it."

She saw it at once. That fiercely protective look that made her feel safe around Brock. Despite the fact that he had so many siblings already, all of the friends that he travelled with became his honorary brother or sister. The longer he knew them, the stronger the sentiment was. He didn't ask what she meant about Ritchie or Drew, he focused on what they needed to do then and there.

"We'll get to him," Brock assured her, reaching out and covering the hand that was holding the keystone. "Don't lose this, just in case. We might need it."

"Do you still have it? The Steelixite that Ash gave you?" Misty wondered. When Ash had returned home for Christmas months before, he had come with a few surprises for his friends, especially her and Brock.

He nodded. "Do you have the Gyaradosite?" She nodded in return. "I guess we'll see what we need when we get there."

Tracey put his hand on Misty's shoulder. "We're with you, Mist. You and everyone else."

"Thank you," she answered honestly. "I'm going after him even if I have to do it alone." Her words were fierce, but she already knew that Ash's Pokémon would be going with her, and that there was a very slim chance of their other friends not coming along. Not after everything that had happened. "How do we get Lance to listen to us?"

...

Lance Greyson had been a young Champion, one of the youngest. He wasn't much older than Red when he was knocked off of his Kanto throne the first time around. After that, he became the Johto Champion, and was then handed the Kanto title back when Red ascended into the position of Pokémon Master. He was the first person to ever reign over two regions at once.

He was no longer young though, and much wiser and used to dealing with people than he used to be. So when he saw an orange flash out of the corner of his eyes, he prepared himself. Misty Waterflower was every bit as fierce as her Gym Leader profile made her out to be, especially when her loved ones were in danger.

Still, her insistence of just running after Ash and the girl that was taken with him was becoming an annoyance. Misty insisted that he didn't understand, but Lance knew more than she did. More than Ash did. He knew just how important it was to get Ash back. The problem was that Team Rocket moved fast, and he was already at the spot Lance theorized recently that Red was being held at. It was the worst case scenario, and if they wanted to get out without any deaths, they needed to plan carefully.

So when she came storming over for the second time, he took a deep breath to suppress his anger and fixed an unimpressed stare at her. "Miss Waterflower, if you insist—"

"No!" Misty practically spat at him. "You listen to me! I don't give two shits if you're a Champion! I don't care!"

Everyone around them fell silent, and Lance was well aware of all her friends gathering around, including Tracey and Brock. Those two had worked with him from the beginning, but it did not surprise him in the least that their loyalty was with their friends first. He wasn't worried about any of them. Though Ash's Pokémon made him a bit wary. Each and every one of them were powerful, well trained, and ready for a fight.

"Listen kid—"

"We got around Team Rocket before! We outran factions of Team Aqua and Team Magma. We helped take down a part of Team Galactic. We avoided, and then fought with Team Plasma. We've been doing better than you have!" Misty was absolutely done with everything right now. She held up Ash's bag and opened it, reaching in to grab one of the orbs out of it. She held it up. "Do you know what this is? This is one of Shamouti Island's treasures. Well, Ice Island, whatever. Years ago, Ash nearly died getting these to save the world with Lugia. You weren't there for that! You weren't there when Mewtwo almost destroyed everything! You weren't there when the Unown took over a town! When Celebi was actually killed but came back! You weren't there when Latios died! When a Mew almost died! Where were you when Dialga and Palkia almost ripped a hole in time and space? When someone nearly killed Giratina? When fucking Arceus was attacking?!" Her face was bright red by this point. "You weren't there! You know who was? Ash! Ash was!"

"Misty," Brock whispered.

She looked at him and then at Lance again. "We've been trying to help save the world because Arceus asked us to and, all offense, but I think Arceus' opinion matters more than yours. Arceus needs these orbs, and Ash is the only one that can actually move them. If he doesn't get a hold of these within 24 hours of when he was kidnapped, they all vanish back to where they came from. We won't be able to get them again. Team Rocket will win." Misty crossed her arms, still holding the orb and bag in her hands. "So unless you think that your plans are above Arceus', and your opinions are above saving the world, we need to go now."

Everyone was silent, staring at Misty with wide eyes.

Then someone laughed. It was one of the G-Men. Slowly, others began to laugh.

"You're hilarious," someone called out.

Tears sprung up in Misty's eyes as rage coursed through her. On her shoulder, Pikachu's fur actually stood on end and sparks flew from his cheeks. She felt a couple people grab her arms, and a quick glance told her that it was Brock and Serena holding her back.

The laughter abruptly ended when a haunting melody echoed through the air. A sound that seemed to echo, beautiful, but also terrifying at the same moment.

Misty knew exactly what it was, but it still made the hairs on her arms stand on end. It had been years since she heard that tune, but it wasn't one that a person could easily forget.

Tracey recognized it too, and slowly headed towards the edge of the cliff, looking out over the ocean. Misty broke away from Brock and Serena, moving beside him along with Pikachu and Charizard, though Ash's other Pokémon remained confused.

"Wha—" Someone behind them started to speak, but were interrupted by a waterspout that ascended from the water. A large shadow glided up within the depths of the twisting column, and the water began to part, revealing shining, pale silver skin with hints of blue.

"Is that what I think it is?" Leaf asked in awe.

"Lugia," Misty answered, keeping her eyes on the legendary Pokémon as it twisted around to face them. She felt a shiver go up her spine when he looked directly at her, before he glanced at Tracey. He remembered them.

Everyone scrambled out of the way as Lugia landed, the picture of grace despite his large size. Now that Misty thought about it, he was much bigger than the other Lugia they had met before.

His long neck twisted as he looked around at her, eyes focused on the bag in her arms. That was when Pikachu jumped off of her shoulder and rushed forward.

"Pika! Pikapi pa cha pika pikachu pika pi cha pikachu." He pointed at Lance and then motioned to the other G-Men, and everyone got the distinct feeling that he was complaining about them. The smug look on the faces of Ash's other Pokémon only added to that inkling.

Lugia's head turned back, and judging by the way people jumped, no one was expecting the booming voice that came from him. "The young ones speak the truth. You must find our Chosen One and return the orbs to him soon."

"Chosen One?" Lance asked, taking a step forward. He had heard stories of a Chosen One in legends before, but never thought it was real.

"The one chosen to guard the legendary Pokémon, and to guard the world against us. Only Arceus can put what is wrong right again, and only the Chosen One can help. You have no time to argue. You must leave."

"Wait a second," someone else spoke up. "What—"

"You have already lost," Lugia said harshly, gliding into the sky and twisting to face them again, the breeze from flapping of his wings causing a couple people to stumble back. "Your human greed and squabbles have destroyed what we have built. Now we work to repair and salvage, but you must find the boy to do that. This is now your only hope to live."

"Lugia!" Misty cried out suddenly, a wave of bravery rushing through her. The Pokémon looked at her, and she continued. "Is there any way you or Giratina could get us to Ash? I know it'd be dangerous but..." She trailed off.

"Giratina will not. Should anything happen, the Distortion World will collapse, and so will this one," Lugia answered, his voice not nearly as harsh with her. "Nor can I help. Alone, I must maintain the beast of the sea until it is all right again."

"We'll go," Lance said, breaking through the silence. He could argue with children, but it was hard to argue with a living legend. "Prepare the helicopters."

"Sir? Who will be going with you?"

Lance looked around at Misty, Tracey, Brock, the Pokémon, and all of their friends. He narrowed his eyes and said, "Everyone."

The relief hit Misty so hard that she sank down to her knees. Maybe they stood a chance yet.

"Hang on Ash, Dawn," she muttered under her breath, looking down at the keystone she refused to let go of. "We're coming. Just hang on."

...

A wave of dizziness and nausea drowned Ash as he slowly regained consciousness. He felt like he had been thrown off of a cliff, probably landing on his head since that hurt the most. It wouldn't surprise him if that's what had happened. Whatever was happening, it felt really wrong. In his tired, slightly delirious state, he couldn't pinpoint what was wrong, just that it was making him anxious.

Slowly, he managed to crack his eyes open, wincing at the harsh contrast of the light above him. He hissed and turned his head slightly, blinking with surprise when he saw long, magenta hair

whip just out of view. He knew that hair. Closing his eyes, he tried to reach out to see if he was right, and that was when the wrongness hit him hard.

Ash's eyes flew open, breathing coming quickly as he realized what was wrong. He couldn't see anything, couldn't feel anything.

He could see with his physical eyes, but that wasn't enough. Before he had gained access to his Aura abilities, he had never known how he could see the world. Once he had them though, everything just seemed so dead and dull without it. It was like ripping away a sense abruptly. It made him feel blind, deaf, and unable to properly feel things by touch, if only metaphorically.

The way it made him panic and feel physically sick was very real though.

It hurt like hell, but he twisted a bit to look down at himself. His arms and legs were clasped in metal restraints as he rested on a steel table, but that didn't matter to him right now. What did matter were the bands clasped onto his wrists. He knew these. He had been forced to wear them some time before (or thousands of years before, depending on how someone looked at it), and had given them to Sheena and Kevin for safe keeping.

His heart sunk. He remembered seeing their names on that list of targets Team Rocket had gone after, before they made their big move on Kanto. Ash mentally cursed himself. He should have known that they'd get the Aura inhibitors.

"They're interesting things, aren't they?" Ash would have jumped if he wasn't strapped down. He tilted his head back, his heart racing when he realized who he was staring at. Doctor Yung walked around the table, staring at him like he was some sort of prize. "I was so glad to find the two who had them in Michina Town. As you can imagine, it took a while for them to disclose what they were, but with my machine, I was able to get it. The girl lasted longer than the boy – but she suffered more and I got so much from their memories."

Dr. Yung moved away, and brought something up above Ash's head. The boy didn't say anything yet, but he just knew what that was, even if it didn't look the same as years ago.

"Can you guess what I saw, Ash?" Yung asked, leaning uncomfortable close, his eyes wide with excitement. "In her memories?" Ash didn't answer, so he continued. "I saw you. It was always you, wasn't it? You were in the memories of so many people here. That was why I made sure you were on the list of targets, and why I made sure that Giovanni had no idea about your Aura. He would never let me keep you otherwise. You can imagine my surprise when it turned out you were more valuable than I thought. More valuable than Giovanni thought." He slipped the device over Ash's head. "You remember how this works, yes? I want you to show me. I want you to show me everything you've seen. All of the legends. The secrets of Aura. I want it all!"

Ash could feel his breathing coming even quicker as he tried desperately not to panic or even show that he was afraid.

"It's almost clichéd how the stars aligned to bring us together, Mr. Ketchum." He punched a few numbers into the computer he was by. "If you focus on the memories I want, it'll be less painful. We best start with Arceus."

"Go to hell." That wasn't what Ash meant to say at all. There was another question on his lips, something that he was forgetting, and it wasn't about Arceus. Really though, Yung and all of Team Rocket could go to hell for what they had done to him and—

Ash jerked up, his head crashing into the helmet-like machine, knocking it to the floor even though

his arms were restrained. His eyes darted wildly around the sterile room, searching for someone who wasn't there.

"Dawn! Where is she? What did you do?"

"The girl that got grabbed with you? Maybe you'll see if you behave. Perhaps I will use her if you don't cooperate. Or what about that lovely redhead from before? You're very fond of her, aren't you?"

Ash knew what it was like to feel angry. He knew what it was like to feel so depressed that there really was no point to keep going. He thought he had felt the gamut of emotions already. This anger though, this was something else that he hadn't felt for a while. This pure, boiling anger practically turned his vision red.

He jerked violently, causing his arms and legs to scream in protest even as Yung put the machine back on his head. Maybe his life didn't mean all that much in the long run, but he wouldn't let his friends suffer if he could stop it somehow.

Pain rushed through him as Yung turned on the machine. It was a horribly familiar pain that just felt so wrong. He desperately tried to keep his thoughts away from Arceus, though he was compelled to let something slip every once and a while.

As he resisted, it suddenly occurred to Ash that he actually could feel the energy from the machine, from the Mirage System. It was so very faint, but it was still there. He tried to focus a bit, and almost cried out in joy. It was very faint too, subdued due to the Mirage, but Aura was there too.

His eyes darted to the clasps on his wrists. There was a faint bit of cracking on them from the last time he had worn them.

The door swung open and slammed into the wall with a bang that sounded more like cannon fire. Ash flinched and the machine shut off. Everything went silent as he looked towards the door, and immediately recoiled.

Giovanni himself stood there, his posture straight and strong. Despite the fact that his face was schooled to look neutral, his eyes were livid, promising death and pain. Ash didn't need his Aura to feel the negativity rolling off the man.

"What is the meaning of this?" Giovanni demanded, snapping his fingers. The men behind him ran in, and started undoing Ash's bindings.

Immediately, he sprang up, his action startling everyone since he was hurt and shouldn't have been moving with his head injury (oh the irony – since a head injury was what got him in Yung's clutches the first time too). Move he did, flinging himself at Yung and slamming his fist into the man's face.

Yung fell, and Ash was grabbed and restrained once again, forcibly turned to face Giovanni instead.

Confusion rushed through him. The man was clapping. "He quite deserved that, did he not? Yung, finish your preparations. I will talk to you about this violation later." He turned to leave, and Ash was dragged along by a couple Rocket Grunts.

He struggled every step of the way as they pulled him into the hallway. Ash needed to get away. He needed to find Dawn.

They went around the corner, and Ash's eyes landed on very familiar green ones. His struggling ceased momentarily, something that the other grunts used to their advantage.

James stared back at Ash, horror creeping through his expressive eyes. Maybe the man wasn't thinking, but he started to take a step forward, his hand slowly reaching out.

Ash shook his head subtly. If he tried to help, James would die. The fact that it was his first instinct, despite being in the midst of a Rocket base (or, what Ash assumed was one) spoke mountains about who he was. Ash had been right when he talked to Misty. James was a good person underneath it all. He couldn't let someone else get hurt because of him.

'Find Dawn,' he tried to mouth. Ash wasn't sure if James understood, but the man did step back, lowering his hand as he watched their group go down the hall. Surely James remembered who Dawn was and would help? She was only a kid, and wasn't meant for a place like this.

Anger rushed through Ash as he started to struggle once more. He hated not being able to use his Aura, feeling almost helpless without it. He wasn't angry for himself this time around, no, he was angry because it kept him from finding his friend.

"Ash!" His head snapped up at the familiar voice calling his name. His eyes met Dawn's worried blue ones, and relief swept through him briefly. She was alive and unharmed from the looks of it. That relief was gone quickly, when he realized that she was chained up to a wall.

One of the stronger men heaved Ash up, pinning him on the wall a few feet away from Dawn, his hands and legs being chained like hers were.

Dawn watched them chain Ash up beside her and struggled a bit against her bindings. She felt her prior fear fading a little bit now that he was with her. It was only when her eyes landed on his wrists that the fear came back. She knew those cuffs on his wrists.

"Those...but Sheena and Kevin..."

"Dead," Ash said, a harsh tone to his voice as he closed his eyes, trying to calm himself down. He took several deep breaths before opening them again. Giovanni entered the room, a Persian with cruel eyes at his side.

Ash studied the room, trying to think of a strategy, like this was a simple Pokémon battle. There was nothing in the room to indicate any sort of secret way out, not even a ventilation system. In fact, there was nothing in the room. It was pure white – almost blindingly so.

"Let Dawn go," Ash said, trying to keep his voice from shaking and cranking. "She shouldn't be here. I'll cooperate. This is on me, not her."

"Ash," Dawn hissed at him angrily. Like hell she was going to let him trade himself for her. He was the one Arceus needed, not her. She was expendable in every sense of the word to the greater picture.

Surprising both of them into silence, Giovanni laughed. The loud, booming sound seemed to dance off the walls and fill the small room. "You have no idea what's going on. Neither of you do. Yung had some mythical idea, but that doesn't matter." The man stood facing the wall with his back to them. "Some people were put on my hit lists at the request and suggestion of others. Perhaps I should have looked into those more. It certainly would have led me to sending a more appropriate team after you. You drew my attention when you escaped. Then at every turn, there you seemed to be." He turned to face them, eyes drilling into Ash's. "The more I looked into you. The more

questions I had. Having no records in a system is just as telling as those who are filled with important records."

Giovanni walked towards Ash, reaching out and grabbing his chin to keep the boy looking at him. "Then I found your mother. Oh, I knew her, long ago. I didn't know her as Delia. No one did. She was called Yellow. Not as famous as Red or Blue, not as famous as Green, but she was there all the same. One of the ones that led to the League murdering my own mother." Giovanni stared at him with interest. "What would you do if your mother died? Would you fight for her? Would you take revenge? I think you would. You're not that dissimilar to me."

"Ash is nothing like you!" Dawn snapped.

"I will get to you later," Giovanni said simply before turning his attention back to Ash. "We grew up in small communities, with only mothers to get us through life. We had many friends and were seen as leaders. We had great ambitions, always striving to be the best. I look at you, and I see who I once was." Giovanni let go of him. "I vowed revenge for my mother, to complete her dream on a global scale. No one will stand in my way. Those who do, die. Blue, his wife, and sister, were all murdered by my agent. A man who fathered your friend – the Green girl. Green turned herself into a mess, though I helped some with that. Then there was Red."

Giovanni walked back from him. "Red. He was the true thorn in my side – in my mother's side. He remains silent no matter what I do, unable to be bent or broken no matter my tortures. Red has always had a weakness for the weak though. I would have put him out of his misery long ago, but I need information from him. And you're going to get it for me."

Ash didn't have a chance to voice his confusion when the wall behind Giovanni slid up into the ceiling, revealing a much bigger room.

Across from them, chained to the wall in a similar fashion, was a man with greasy black hair, skin that was sickly pale and already showing signs of hunger and malnutrition. Despite this, Ash still knew who he was. How could he not recognize his hero?

"Red, we have some guests. I think you will find them most entertaining."

Slowly, Red's crimson eyes opened. He blinked a couple times as he lifted his head to look around with disinterest. Then his gaze landed on Ash and Dawn, and his blank expression twisted into one of horror. It was only brief before he had a straight mask on again, but they all saw it.

Giovanni smirked as he walked to Red. "You know what will happen if you remain silent. You could end this before it starts and give me the information I need."

Red looked at the two teenagers before his eyes turned to Giovanni. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and thick. "There are people we had to hide from you and others who wanted them. They would be killed. Pokémon would be killed. I'd rather die."

"Die? No, you're not going to die," Giovanni assured him, sounding suspiciously excited. "What will happen will be slow and painful." He snapped his fingers, and two sets of doors opened.

Ash felt shivers go up his spine when he saw so many different kinds of weapons, along with buckets and vats of things that he was sure weren't pleasant.

Giovanni walked over and picked up a wicked-looking blade. The Persian carved into the hilt showed that it was made especially for him. Calmly, as if he had all the time in the world, Giovanni walked back and stood between Ash and Dawn. "Who is the one that will make you talk? Is it your

son?" He pointed the knife at Ash, before moving it to Dawn. "Or is it your daughter?"

Ash felt like all of the air had been sucked out of the room, that his heart had stopped beating and his mind had imploded. Surely he had heard that wrong?

"Your son, or your daughter? Choose, or I'll choose for you."

Ash's head whipped around and he stared at Dawn with wide eyes, an identical expression of shock mingling with confusion staring back at him. They both looked forward and voiced the same sentiment at the same time. "What?!"

...

When Tracey mentioned the tunnel, Misty had expected a thin thing filled with rocks and other hazards, but that wasn't the case. It was huge and perfectly carved, making her wonder how it wasn't found before.

Leaf had voiced this question as well, and Gary simply said that if the legendary Pokémon didn't want them to find it, they wouldn't have.

Misty also didn't expect Lance to pull together such a large group of people to go into Celadon City. Brock was able to figure out why though. By going, they would give away the fact that there's a way into the city, and possibly lose any advantage that they give them. So in a hastily thrown together plan, they were going to strike Team Rocket, and they were going to hit them hard.

"You okay?" Serena whispered to her as they walked in the tunnel. There were so many people around them, tense and ready to fight, that hearing the girl's sweet voice was a bit startling.

"Yeah. Just anxious." Misty's hand moved up, fingers curling around the Keystone that hung securely from a woven cord around her neck that Tracey had hastily made her.

On her shoulder, Pikachu shifted a bit. The Pokémon had been so still, almost like he was frozen in time, so feeling a bit of movement from him was comforting. All of Ash's other Pokémon were within their Pokéballs (which had luckily been left behind with his bag) in her pack, along with her Pokémon, a first aid kit, and the orbs.

Clemont had given her a watch that was counting down the time they had to get the orbs to Ash, and it was getting worryingly low. Traveling from Shamouti Island to Blackthorn City, even in the fast helicopters, still took some time. They didn't even bother stopping in to see everyone that was still there, starting on their way into Celadon City as soon as possible.

It was a really long walk though, since they were technically walking under the entire region and had no way to get vehicles down there. Startlingly though, it didn't take nearly as long as it should have.

"It's probably some sort of portal," Clemont figured. "Legendary Pokémon can do that."

Misty didn't care, as long as it got them to Ash before they lost the orbs – before they lost him.

"Ash and Dawn will be fine," Serena insisted, breaking Misty from her morbid thoughts. "I know it's been a rough time, but they're both stubborn."

"I know." Misty felt a bit of guilt for not really including Dawn in her thoughts. She loved the younger girl, she really did, and they would get her back too. Ash, for one, would never let them leave a friend behind, no matter what his mental state was. A tiny part of Misty hated herself for

the fact that she was so selfishly focusing on one person.

Yes, she wanted to save Ash, to save the world, but that wasn't her only reason. Misty knew that she was selfish, that she was terrified that she wouldn't be able to keep going if she lost one more person she loved. It would be hard, but if she had her family, her sisters, Misty knew she would be able to move on with her life eventually if something happened to Ash. She loved him, but he wasn't her very reason for living (and she knew she wasn't his either). With everyone gone, she wasn't sure if she could survive one more crack in her heart.

Walking just behind Misty, May clutched her pack tightly, as if her stronger grip would protect the Pokéballs inside. Along with her own that were in the pouch at her waist, she carried Dawn's as well. She was nervous, or rather, one part nervous. She was also two parts determined. Determined to get her friend back and get to Blackthorn City.

"I met Max when this whole thing started," Brock told her when they were in the helicopter. "He's been there ever since. He likes to try and help, but he's been safe."

May almost wept at that. She didn't know what happened to her parents, just that they were being hunted by factions of Team Aqua and Magma. She didn't know how Solidad, Harley, or Brendan were fairing after they parted ways. Now though, she knew that her brother was okay, and it lifted her spirits a bit.

May felt her heart squeeze, and she gripped the strap of her bag even tighter. It hurt to think about Drew, knowing that he was gone forever. She had accepted that it would hurt for a long time, but she had also accepted that he was gone. There was no need to worry anymore, since he was away from the hellhole that their world could very well turn into sooner rather than later.

She pursed her lips at that thought. In a way, not knowing the fate of her family and friends was even worse.

"May? Are you alright?" Brock asked her, his brow furrowing slightly as he regarded his young friend.

"Just thinking," she responded, smiling slightly. "I'm glad Max is okay."

"He's a bit bored and frustrated at times, but he's okay," Brock assured once again. "He hangs around Bonnie, Clemont's sister, quite a bit. They're starting to become thick as thieves."

May giggled. "That's good to hear." At least her brother was making friends. Her eyes flickered to Serena, Clemont, Iris, Cilan, Gary, and Leaf. She was making new friends too. If anything good came out of this mess, it was that.

"Brock," she muttered, realizing something as her thoughts twisted around the idea of friends. "Did anyone tell you about...Drew?"

"Drew? What about him?" Brock spoke cautiously, because he could see pain in her eyes. She spoke so reluctantly, that he knew something was wrong.

"He's gone." Saying the words out loud would never be easy. "We were on a train and part of it broke. We couldn't get our Pokémon. He and I were slipping. Serena grabbed me to keep me up, but all three of us were going to fall so Drew—he—" She couldn't say it again.

Brock rested a hand on her shoulder as he realized what she was trying to say. He didn't say anything, but he did feel a bolt of shock run through him. He had lost his parents, so he knew what the pain of losing someone was like. He had already talked to his siblings many times to help deal

with the guilt of surviving when their parents sacrificed themselves to let them escape.

Bless Lucy, who turned out to be amazing at aiding others through their grief.

Still, the thought of Drew dying – snarky, sarcastic, witty, dorky, small Drew – was something else. He knew people were dying all over. Misty had whispered to him about Ritchie (she must have thought that Drew's story was May's to tell), and it didn't get any easier hearing that young people he once knew were dying.

Brock swallowed, and it was almost painful. He had been relatively safe this whole time, yet these young people that he knew and cared about were fighting and dying. His free hand curled into a fist. He wouldn't let that happen again, not if he could help it.

Cilan watched Brock become tense and angry. Though they only met twice before – once with Ash and once on their own – he was able to easily get a grasp of Brock's personality. It had a very distinct flavor that screamed of maturity, warmth, and fatherly love. Oh, Brock definitely wasn't a biological father, but he was certainly a father to his siblings and many of his friends - an older brother at the very least.

Brock cared so strongly, that much was obvious. Cilan could almost taste the determination and protectiveness rolling off of him. In a way, it was nice to know that there was someone else a little older than the others that would be with them every step of the way.

Cilan hadn't realized it, but since he had joined with everyone else a few weeks ago, a part of him had started taking on the responsibility as the adult in the group. It made him feel personally responsible for Ash and Dawn's abduction.

After all, he had been the one Dawn came over to, asking if he thought it was okay to go up on the cliffs. He had said yes. Having seen the residents of the island himself, he figured that they were safe there.

He had been horribly wrong, and that was going to eat him just as much as not knowing what happened to his brothers did.

Cilan shook his head and focused his green eyes forward. He couldn't think about Chili and Cress right now. He had to focus on Ash and Dawn.

Feeling a nudge at his side, he looked down at Iris. Wild, stubborn, sweet Iris who seemed to grow more beautiful and mature every single day. He was so glad that she was still with him.

"Don't pout," Iris said, keeping her voice low.

The corners of his lips twitched up a bit. "Well, since you asked so nicely..."

Iris nudged him again and grinned. "Shut up." She turned forward to pay attention in front of them, playing with the hem of her flowing sleeves.

"I bet Ash and Dawn are giving them hell," Iris said after a moment, feeling the conviction washing through her. She knew how low Ash had fallen in Unova, but that didn't change her mind.

"I'm not disagreeing," Cilan said, eyeing her curiously, "but what makes you so sure?"

"Dawn's feisty and stubborn," she answered immediately. "And Ash won't let anything happen to her. She's basically his baby sister."

Cilan could agree with that assessment. It was something he had noted in his first evaluation of Dawn. Though they looked nothing alike, there were certain things that they both did that were so similar. Small, unconscious, physical ticks, certain personality traits, and expressions on their faces that were just so similar. He had been sure they were related. Of course, he had been wrong, but quickly decided that was okay.

Iris had commented on them too. It was something she could appreciate since she grew to see her friend as sort of a little brother, even if he was older and taller than her.

"We'll get them back," Iris said, a note of finality to her voice. Even if she had to unleash Hydreigon upon Team Rocket, they were getting their friends back.

Serena could appreciate the words, having heard them with ease. It was hard to be so optimistic on her own, but she was trying.

Serena looked around at everyone else and couldn't really believe that they were doing this. They were marching towards the enemy's stronghold. In a sense, it was almost like they were marching towards the final battle.

That was impossible though. They didn't have everything that they needed yet, and she highly doubted the water orb was in a rather land-locked city in Kanto.

Serena let her mind wander as she eyed her friends. A part of Serena wanted to laugh when she thought back to when Ash had been kidnapped with Bonnie. She had been so worried about them and had done what she could at the time, but actually marching towards what could be her death wouldn't have crossed her mind. She had been so silly back then, blinded by jealousy and a bit of anger that Ash didn't love her like she loved him.

Oh, she indeed loved Ash once, she accepted that so willingly. Now though, that romantic side wasn't there anymore, and she was glad. Serena was glad that she and Misty weren't at odds over something as ridiculous as a boy, especially with everything else that had occurred.

She felt better about herself, oddly enough. She felt stronger. She no longer felt completely useless.

Serena jumped slightly when someone stumbled beside her. Reaching out instinctively, she managed to steady Clemont. "Careful."

"Thanks," he said sheepishly, and honestly, it was adorable. Serena had no clue exactly what she felt about Clemont – it wasn't exactly the same as she had once felt for Ash, but it was different than when she met him too. Now wasn't the time to focus on that though. There would be time to explore that part of who she was later on.

"It's no problem," she said with a smile, letting go of his arm. Her eyes flickered down towards his hands, where he was holding a small device. "What's that?"

"We'll be there soon," Clemont said while motioning towards him. "I've been tracking where we are on GPS, which surprisingly works even way down here –"

"Good reception, thanks Mew," Serena toned in.

"—and our location suddenly jumped a little while ago," he finished.

"Jumped?"

Clemont nodded his head and showed her the screen. There was a tiny dot that was very close to

the place labeled 'Celadon City'. "We were close to the Johto border not too long ago. Sure, we don't have all the obstacles of everything above us, but it should still take longer."

"Huh. That's great though!"

Pushing his classes up the bridge of his nose, Clemont had to agree with that. There was something else about all of this that occurred to him.

"They knew," he spoke up, brow furrowing. "The legendary Pokémon – or Mew at least – they knew we'd need this tunnel, and we'd need a way to get there fast."

"There's no way to prove that," Serena replied, frowning a bit and sounding reluctant.

"Psychic Pokémon can see the future," Clemont pointed out. "Maybe they can't interfere, but they knew."

"Maybe that's a good sign then." Gary's voice startled both of them. The two Kalos natives looked around towards him. Gary shrugged his shoulders. "They don't want Team Rocket to win anymore than we do. So they gave us a way to save Ash and Dawn, and the spheres too."

The two blonds seemed to accept it easily, and though he seemed outwardly careless about the idea, it still didn't sit well with Gary. Ever since they got to Hoenn, he had been so sure that they were being manipulated and used by something else, like pieces on a chessboard. He had always hated the idea of his fate being out of his hands.

His father was gone. His mother was gone. His aunt was gone. That had been outside of his grasp to stop, but everything else he did, that was him. Gary had always been proud that way. Being used didn't sit well with anyone, he knew that, but the thought still irked him even if he had accepted it.

Wanting to focus on something else, he tried looking around the walls to see if there were any interesting symbols there, but it was all smooth, left untouched, so his eyes wandered. He looked from one person to the next until his eyes fell on Misty.

A wave of resentment rushed through him. Not for the redhead, but rather for the friends that they were searching for. Dawn was a sweet girl, and Ash had been the friend he never truly deserved in his eyes, and Team Rocket had no right taking either of them.

Hadn't his friend suffered enough? Hadn't they all?

"Keep scowling like that and your face will stay that way," Leaf noted from where she walked beside him.

"I'm just thinking about everything. Team Rocket. Ash. Dawn. The legendary Pokémon. Everything."

Leaf quirked an eyebrow at him, but she understood exactly what he meant. Looking down at her gloved hands, she shrugged. "If Clemont's right, we'll be there soon. Then we can show Team Rocket that they never should have messed with us." Her light brown eyes looked up towards him again. "Our parents couldn't stop them, but we can."

The brunette girl honestly had no idea where her conviction was coming from, but it wasn't going to fade. Maybe she was too much like her mother for comfort, and maybe Gary was right that her fear wasn't having a similar personality to the woman that gave birth to her, but rather sharing the same fate as her. That didn't matter. She wouldn't let herself end up the same way.

She would save her friends and fight to the bitter end to save everything else along with them.

Tracey observed the entire group. It was strange just how different everyone was since he had last seen them, though he couldn't speak for those he never met like Dawn, Iris, or Cilan.

Everyone else was brimming for a fight, and it was almost inspiring. Tracey knew that he wasn't really a fighter, but he was willing to do what he needed to this time. If he could save the lives of some people, he would. It wouldn't make up for the blonde hair and green eyes that haunted him, but it would be something.

He stopped suddenly, realizing that Champion Lance had stopped the progression. The man held up his hand, and soon no one was moving.

"We're here," Lance spoke, his voice almost booming in the darkness that was only illuminated by the flashlights they carried. Given how many people were there, it was quite bright. Enough for the man to see the determined expression on so many faces. There were Gym Leaders, Elites, Frontier Brains, and so many strong trainers with them, and not one of them seemed reluctant about their mission being primarily about getting a single boy back (plus the girl that was taken with him).

He couldn't help but admire that.

"Ash Ketchum's greatest strength isn't being able to adapt in battles or his creative strategies," Clair had told him when he remarked on this observation earlier. "It's that he makes people feel good about themselves. He inspires them and makes them better."

His cousin didn't say it, but Lance knew what she left off the end. He told her the entire story about why they were going, so she knew what no one else did.

He and Red were the only ones that didn't see just how easy it was for Ash to rally and inspire people. Oh, they had both known that he was a special boy, even when others didn't, but not for the right reasons. They never had, and it was going to come back to bite both of them someday. His ability to inspire, to make others better, to be so genuine, prompted true loyalty above all others.

"Are we just going to stand here? Or are we going?" Misty demanded, crossing her arms. Pikachu did the same on her shoulder, glaring at the Champion. They were both fairly formidable too.

Arceus help the world if she and Ash ever had kids.

"Not yet," Lance said sternly. "We need to strategize more. We're right here, and we have plenty of time. I need all my Elites and those that I have assigned as commanders to come over here."

A fierce scowl crossed Misty's pretty face as anger rushed through her again. She could see the end of the tunnel. They were so close, and yet, Lance was hesitating.

Her hands ran along the Keystone again, another one going to Gyarados' Pokéball on her belt, picturing the mega stone that Ash had given her.

At that point, Misty was sure that if anything bad had happened to Ash or Dawn, that she would have her Pokémon drown anyone that crossed her path.

...

Ash burst into laughter, startling everyone in the room that had previously been quiet. His laughter was hysterical, there were tears in his eyes (surely from the laughter), and his gut hurt.

"Are you kidding me?" he said. "My father's name is Jack Ketchum, and he's a no-good, failure of a trainer that left us. There's no way Dawn is my sister. What are the odds of me being friends with a sister I never knew?" Ash snorted. "Ridiculous."

"You think so?" Giovanni looked at Red. "Is this your son? And your daughter?"

Red stared at him blankly.

Giovanni sighed and then slammed the knife into Ash's arm. He jerked and cried out in pain and shock, another scream strangling him as the man started to drag the knife down. This time, the tears were not from laughter at all.

"Stop it!" Dawn screeched, jerking against her chains. "Stop!"

"It's true." Red's raspy voice barely reached them, but it did. Giovanni jerked the knife out of Ash's arm and faced the chained-up man, who was staring at the floor. "I was born Jack Ketchum, but anyone who knew that aside from Yellow, Green, and Lance are long gone. I had an affair with Johanna Berlitz once."

"Oh my Arceus," Dawn muttered, her entire body shaking. "Oh my—oh god."

"Good," Giovanni said with his silky voice. "Now, pick one. Father's often cherish their daughters, but there is also an attachment to their only sons as well – the ones that carry on the family name. Who will it be?"

"You coward!" Dawn screamed, once again throwing herself against the shackles. "How pathetic are you? Having to use children? You're a monster!"

"I see that you both have that fighting spirit in common." Giovanni said. He nodded at Dawn, and several men rushed over to yank her down from the wall. "Little girls should know when to hold their mouths."

"No!" Ash yelled, struggling wildly against his own chains despite the newly searing pain in his arm and the blood that dripped down it. Panic erupted in his chest as he shoved aside all of the shock because it didn't matter if apparently Red was his father and Dawn was his half-sister. He needed to get out.

He focused on the little bit of Aura he could feel, but it wasn't going to do anything for him.

Giovanni stepped up to one of the vats. He nodded to the person restraining Dawn's arm, and the man moved it so that she was holding it out. Giovanni took a spoon and carefully dipped it into the bowl, coming back with a liquid that made her eyes sting and water. He dropped the bright green liquid onto her index finger.

Dawn shrieked and jerked back, but when she curled her hand into a fist the liquid that was on her finger burned more of her skin, so she opened it again, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Dawn!" Ash yelled, jerking against his chains. His eyes darted to Red desperately. Surely he was going to do something to try to help? Red was a good person as it was, but if Giovanni's words really were true, Dawn was Red's daughter.

"This is concentrated Arbok Acid. It's highly corrosive and highly painful." Giovanni spoke as if he was having a friendly chat with a school child, which Red certainly wasn't. "First, I'm going to slowly shove her hands into it. Then her face. Perhaps we will even get a bigger vat, and I'll throw her in entirely."

"Come on, come on," Ash muttered desperately, trying to get the tiny bit of Aura to react. His eyes darted to Red again. "Do something!"

Red didn't say a word. He just stared at Giovanni unwaveringly.

The Team Rocket Boss himself grabbed Dawn's arms, forcing her to hold both her arms out over the vat, her palms facing the liquid. Dawn jerked back, struggling to try and get away. "Come on, surely you won't let a child – your own daughter – suffer?"

"Let go of her!" Ash yelled, since Red clearly wasn't going to. He could feel the chains and cuffs digging into his arms, bruising and leaving angry red marks that were marred only from the blood on his arm from the stab wound. "Do something!" This yell was directed towards Red again.

Red looked at him briefly, but then turned his gaze back to Giovanni, he said nothing. The cruel man started to lower Dawn's hands towards the acid.

Red stayed silent. Horror hit Ash as he realized the man wasn't going to say anything. Whatever secrets he had, he deemed more important than them – the teenagers he admitted were his children. Tears rushed down Ash's cheeks. He didn't even wince as someone came over and gave him a mild sedative to calm him down. He didn't even realize that his arm was being wrapped up (clearly he was still too important to let bleed to death).

In a part of his mind, there was a young Ash that still existed that cooked up all kinds of scenarios that might happen when his father came back. None of them had ever been like this.

Ash closed his eyes and reached for the faint light with as much determination and desperation as he could muster. He could still feel his blood pumping dangerously fast, but in complete contrast, his mind now felt calmer and clearer thanks to the sedative. It let him focus.

Dawn managed to kick one of the men holding her in the groin, and successfully jerked back from the table, the momentum almost sending Giovanni's own hands into the acid. She tried to run, but was grabbed and forced backwards.

Ash was sure that his blood pressure was in dangerous levels right now, but it didn't matter. He felt a rush of warmth, and then he could see everything again.

He pushed through the cracks on the cuffs, and they shattered. The sound startled those closest to him, but what happened next startled everyone.

Ash twisted his hands around and unleashed his Aura at his own chains, shattering them. He jerked forward, his heart pounding in his ears from the adrenaline that erupted in his system. He lunged forward, slamming back anyone that came towards him with a shield.

A visible glow surrounded his hands as he created an Aura Sphere and threw it at Giovanni. The man just barely moved so it wouldn't hit his chest, but the power still sent him to the floor. Immediately, some of his Grunts were by his side, hurrying him out of the door.

Dawn slammed her heel onto the person holding her and shoved him back, knocking the table and all of its contents – blades and acid, to the floor.

Ash collapsed to his knees, but he could still feel the Aura pulsing through him, lashing out at anyone that got close – anyone that felt like an enemy. He wasn't even actually aware of what he was doing. Maybe it was the adrenaline, or perhaps the sedative finally catching up to him. All that mattered was that he didn't react to the person coming up behind him, staying far enough away to avoid the pulsing Aura, but close enough to cleanly hit him with the bullet from her gun.

It was like everything was in slow motion. He had heard the gunshot and managed to open his eyes, though he didn't turn. Ash felt something press against his back, and there was another loud bang. This time he flinched, feeling the power of a psychic shield

Twisting around, Ash blinked with surprise when he saw a Wobbuffet standing behind him.

Meowth threw himself at the woman that almost shot Ash, clawing at her face.

Jessie and James practically flew into the room. Jessie dropped to her knees beside Ash as James ran over to Red, using a key to unlock his shackles.

"Help is here," Jessie assured him, her voice awkward as if she wasn't sure how kind she should have been. "We need to go."

"Dawn," Ash muttered, looking up. Relief hit him when his blue haired friend met his gaze. No, if Red was telling the truth, she was his sister, wasn't she?

He pushed himself up and took a few steps towards her. Then the room was rocked by an explosion. As room shook, Ash fell forward, slamming into Dawn. In turn, the much smaller girl was thrown back, her unsteady footing twisting her around. She threw out her hands to catch herself.

The bloodcurdling shriek that echoed through the room as Dawn's palms landed in the acid that had fallen to the floor was horrifying.

Ash grabbed her arms, jerking her off of the floor and towards him. Her hands were a bubbling, red, bloody mess.

"Don't let her touch herself anywhere else," Red's croaking voice spoke up. James was helping him walk, but it was really more like dragging him.

Ash wanted to spit in Red's face. Instead, he kept his arms around Dawn and held her tightly. "Come on, we need to go. We'll get you help, I promise." He held her close to his side in an awkward hug as they started to move, Jessie recalling Wobbuffet.

"This way!" Jessie called out as she led the way into the hallway. Whatever was going on surely wasn't just caused by Ash lashing out. Something else was going on. The more stories they ran up, the more Ash was sure that the Rocket base was being attacked from the outside.

Meowth had yet to add in his own normal quips, and was the first to lunge at anyone that came towards them. It never really occurred to Ash that he could be quite fast when he wanted to be.

"Only one more floor to go," James assured them, still helping Red along.

"No! You can't leave!" Doctor Yung appeared out of nowhere, his eyes almost rabid as he looked towards Ash, who was still holding a sobbing Dawn. "I need you still!"

Ash jerked away, his back slamming into a steel wall as he held the girl close to him so she wouldn't jerk her injured hands.

"Leave 'em alone!" Meowth snarled and jumped up at Yung, slashing him across the face. "We're the only ones allowed ta bother dem!"

Yung yelped and grabbed Meowth's tail. "A Mirage Pokémon would never act like this." He turned and threw Meowth over the edge of the railing that was beside them.

James yelled, and Jessie screamed in shock and rage. She threw herself forward, her entire body slamming into Yung's and knocking him over the same railing.

Ash couldn't help himself, he lurched forward to look down, and even Dawn was staring at Doctor Yung's form below them, bent in ways a human shouldn't have been able to, with blood starting to surround him. There was something even more important that they noticed though.

Meowth was hanging by a nail just below the railing. "Help me up, would ya?"

Jessie grabbed the Pokémon and pulled him back over. He brushed her off quickly, looking completely nonchalant, but Ash could feel just how shaken up he was.

"Oh no," James muttered, staring at the end of the hall where the staircase was. Everyone followed his gaze, and saw that there was a growing amount of Grunts down there.

There was no way to get through without a fight, and Ash didn't want to let go of Dawn.

He reached out, trying to feel how many individuals there were exactly, but a brilliant figure above them instantly drew his attention.

"Get down!" Ash yelled, pulling Dawn to the floor with him, keeping one arm around her to shield her. He threw his second hand up, trusting her not to touch any other parts of her skin, and created an Aura Shield just in time.

The ceiling slammed down on the Grunts, water rushing in as a massive Mega Gyarados crashed inside.

Ash's entire body shuddered with effort as the water slammed into his shield, his injured arm screaming in pain, but he was able to protect himself, Dawn, Red, and Team Rocket easily enough. He kept his eyes shut, since it was easier to focus when he could only see the streams of Aura around him.

Then he felt her, and his eyes snapped open. A laugh escaped his lips when Ria landed in front of him, using her own Aura to help alleviate some of the pressure off of him. She was able to phase through the shield without destroying it, thankfully.

Ash turned his attention to Dawn, who was still whimpering.

"Can you heal her?" James asked, his worry practically palpable. The question startled Ash a bit, but Team Rocket had been around so long that they probably knew everything there was to know about him. Which said a lot, especially since Red looked so dumbfounded, and he was supposed to be his father.

It was a sad, sad day when Ash would pick James over the Pokémon Master that he idolized his entire life.

Ash looked carefully at Dawn's hands. It wasn't a simple cut that he could force back together. He had never been good with burns, and these looked horrible. Not to mention the sheer amount of nerves that could have been damaged (apparently that biology class did pay off) made him wary.

He shook his head, immediately regretting it as his vision spun. Dawn needed a doctor, and he probably did too.

The water stopped flowing, and Ria lowered the shield.

"Pikapi!"

Ash looked up as Pikachu rushed over to them, relief on the Pokémon's face. He smiled a bit at how the little Pokémon was literally vibrating from relief and excitement.

Then Pikachu saw Dawn's hands and his ears fell. "Chaa."

"We need a doctor over here!" Jessie suddenly yelled. Ash looked up at her, startled by her sudden movements. It was only then that he realized she wasn't wearing her normal white shirt with an R on it. She had discarded that, leaving her with only her black crop top she wore underneath. A quick glance at James told him that he had done the same. That was probably smart.

"Champion Lance! The targets are over here!" Someone else yelled. "And—" the person hesitated "—Master Red is with them..."

"Oh Arceus, Dawn!" Without warning, Brock was in front of them. He didn't even bother looking at Team Rocket, accepting their presence immediately. He stared at the younger girl's hands. "What happened?"

"Arbok acid," Ash managed to say. "Jessie and James saved us. They saved us, Brock. Let everyone know that."

"I will. I promise. Come on, Dawn." He reached out to take the girl from Ash, frowning a bit when the boy's grip on her tightened. "Ash, I need to help her, you have to let go." Brock looked at his arms. "You need help too."

Ash didn't even realize that he was so wary of letting the sniffing girl go. He knew Brock could help her in ways that he couldn't, but Ash didn't really want to. It took him a second to realize that it was more selfish than anything else, so he reluctantly let her go.

Brock immediately gathered Dawn into his arms and hurried away. Ash watched them go, the adrenaline in his veins starting to wear off. The wound on his head was starting to pound again, and he felt so tired and sick.

He saw her before she saw him. Someone came over to collect Red, and others were asking Jessie and James questions. Someone was even trying to talk to him, but he didn't react to it. Ria and Pikachu exchanged worried looks until they saw what he was fixated on.

Misty was standing beside her Mega Gyarados. She was dirty, bruised, a bit bloody, her hair was a mess, and she looked completely infuriated.

She was the most fascinating thing he had seen all day, and that was saying something.

"Pikachu! Pikachu!" Pikachu cried out, and she whipped around, green eyes immediately falling onto Ash.

Relief swept over her face as she ran forward without saying another word. Ash was vaguely aware of his Keystone around her neck, but didn't say anything. Maybe it was the drugs that had been injected into him finally catching up, or perhaps the blood loss and concussion he surely had, but he felt really lightheaded as she threw herself to her knees in front of him, wrapping her arms around him and hugging him to her.

Ash leaned on her heavily, burying his face in her shoulder. He could feel her relief in spades, and realized that she was shaking as much as he was.

He had been beaten, drugged, briefly tortured, and stabbed. Dawn had been hurt, threatened, and

eventually burned horribly. He discovered that she was his sister and Red was their shared parent, the implications of which he physically couldn't comprehend at that moment. It was too much, far too much.

"Ash," Misty whispered, or maybe it just felt like a whisper to him. She pulled away slightly, shifting her bag around so it was between them. She opened it, and Ash blinked at the glass orbs. "Hurry, before they vanish."

Right, that was a thing. He tried to reach up, but his hand was shaking so violently that he couldn't seem to control it right. Ria reached out gently, lifting his hand for him and setting it on the orbs. He heard Misty inhale sharply when she saw his wounded arm.

One by one, the light began to dance in them again, until they were all glowing, sending multicoloured lights around the rooms. If Ash would have looked up, he would have seen Jessie and James stare in awe. He also would have seen Champion Lance gape in surprise as he moved to help Master Red stand.

Misty closed the bag and swung it back onto her shoulders before tugging him close again. "I got you. It's okay." Her own voice choked up at her words, and Ash's arms slowly rose up, despite the shaking. He hugged her back, though he didn't say anything. He had her back too.

Ash wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, but he was aware of people buzzing around them for a while. It didn't matter to him though. Nothing did at that exact moment. All he knew was that he was safe – they were all safe – and that was what mattered.

He closed his eyes and allowed the unconsciousness that had been trying to creep up on him finally take hold.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

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Who We Are Now

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Fat tears flowed down May's cheeks, and when she tried to speak it came out as an odd bubbling, squeak of a sound. Her feet were moving before she could even tell them to, and the next thing she knew, her arms were around her little brother, hugging him close as they both fell to their knees. Max clutched her tightly, his face in her shoulder, and he didn't even try to hide his sobs of relief.

May had so much to tell him. She had to tell him about Drew. She had to tell him about their parents. There were no words to say though. Not yet. For now, she would just hold her little brother as long as he would allow.

Their reunion wasn't even disturbed by Bonnie's excited scream as the little girl ran and threw herself into her brother, knocking him to the ground. Clemont laughed, even as his glasses fell to the floor, holding the little girl close as he buried his face in her hair. Bonnie was crying, and so was he. He felt a shadow fall over them, and looked up to meet his father's familiar brown eyes. He tried to smile, but his lips trembled terribly.

Meyer said nothing. He simply fell to his knees beside his two children and hugged them both close, never wanting to let either of them go.

Serena smiled warmly at the reunion, feeling her own eyes tear up. She wanted so badly to embrace Bonnie too, but knew it wasn't her place yet.

"Serena!"

She swung around, eyes locking onto her mother as Grace rushed towards her. Serena laughed as she met her mother halfway, hugging her tightly as the laughter turned into tears. Her mother hugged her just as tightly, and Serena could feel the woman's tears on her shoulder. Her mother was muttering nonsense words under her breath, but it didn't matter to her. She was just relieved to be there again.

Professor Oak watched with eager blue eyes as more and more people flooded into the building.

Finally, he caught sight of the one person he was looking for. As if instantly drawn to him, Gary glanced around and they locked eyes. Immediately, the teenager hurried towards him, keeping his hands in his pockets. Gary stood before his grandfather, looking so much like his father that it almost hurt Professor Oak. A part of him had been worried he lost his grandson too.

Gary was a bit startled when Professor Oak hugged him, the man wasn't exactly known for his love of hugs after all. Still, he slowly let his hands leave his pockets and wrap around his grandfather. Relief hit him hard, and he allowed himself to lean onto the man. Who cared if he didn't uphold a certain image? It didn't matter. Nothing else did.

Leaf looked up, nervousness claiming her as her mother, Amanda Green, stepped close to her. The woman stared at her daughter, and the resemblance between the two was so uncanny that it made a few people look at them in passing.

To Leaf, her mother looked so different. Physically the same, but her skin wasn't deathly pale and her green eyes had a spark in them that she had never seen before. It hurt to know that adventure and danger had brought her to life when her own daughter couldn't.

Slowly, Amanda reached up and placed her hand on her daughter's cheek. "I'm glad you're safe."

That startled the teenage a bit. She blinked her dusty brown eyes up at the woman before slowly nodding her head. "I'm glad you are too."

Cilan sighed as he watched the reunions around them. "Am I a bad person to say I'm a bit jealous?"

"No, not at all," Tracey answered without hesitation. What he wouldn't give to check in on his parents to see if they were okay, even though he knew they probably were. Even more, he'd love for Daisy and her sisters to come through the door without warning, but that was a far off dream.

"I don't...really have anyone that I'd greet like this," Iris admitted, sounding almost ashamed about that fact. It wasn't her fault though.

"I'm just glad everyone's okay," Misty said as she held Pikachu close to her chest.

"Any word on Ash or Dawn?" Tracey asked.

"No, not yet." Misty shook her head. "Brock's helping with Dawn, as far as I can tell. Her hands were burned badly."

"Pi Pikachu," the Pokémon said, sounding quite cranky.

"They wouldn't let him stay with Ash," she explained, yawning loudly.

"Let's get you guys some rooms," Tracey decided, not wanting to be idle too long. "You could use a good sleep. We all could." There was absolutely no room to argue with his claims. Even stubborn Misty who probably wanted to stay awake until she heard about Ash could agree with that.

"We'll check up on him tomorrow, I promise," Misty assured Pikachu, who sighed and nodded in response. Ash would be okay. They were safe now.

...

Ash's brown eyes snapped open, and he looked around the dark room wildly. The distinct smell of disinfectant hit his nose, and he jerked his arms up to make sure that they weren't locked down beside him on the bed. He had no idea where he was, but the last time he woke up he had been in a

very unpleasant situation.

"Shh. It's okay sweetie. Calm down."

A warm, deliciously familiar hand stroked his hair, and he calmed down enough to feel an aura as warm as summer, made with pale yellows, pinks, and blues.

As he calmed down, Ash realized that he wasn't shackled down, but he did have an IV in his arm. That didn't matter though. What did matter was the woman sitting beside him on the bed, one arm around his shoulders to hold him close, the other stroking his hair.

His breath caught in his throat as memories came rushing back. He grimaced and managed to say one word. "Dawn?"

"She's okay. She'll be okay. We're trying to see if we can get her mother from Sinnoh. She'll be fine for now though. All of your friends are okay."

Relief washed over him, and Ash allowed himself to bury his face into his mother's neck, the arm that wasn't tethered to a needle going around her body as tears welled up in his eyes and fell down his cheeks. He felt her tears fall onto his skin too as she held him close.

"Shh, it's okay, I'm here," Delia whispered as she pressed her lips to her son's black hair. She couldn't stop her own tears if she tried. "I'm here."

"Mom," Ash choked out. All of the weight on his shoulders suddenly seemed to give way, because he was in his mother's arms and he was safe. Home had always been safe, and home was where Delia was. He once would have claimed that Pallet Town was home, but he knew that was only partially true. It was where he grew up. If his mother moved halfway across the world, Pallet Town would cease to be home and wherever she was would be.

He wasn't some great Chosen One destined to save the world. He was just a teenage boy who needed his mother.

By the time his tears subsided, Ash had a headache again. Delia leaned him back against the pillow and shifted away from him. Immediately, he panicked and reached for her, but his mother smiled reassuringly and took the seat next to him. "I'm not going anywhere. I promise. You need to get some sleep. I'll be here in the morning, I promise."

"Mom," Ash muttered, not wanting to sleep yet but feeling it desperately clawing at him. "He said—Giovanni...he said that Red was my father. That Dawn was my sister."

"I can't tell you if Dawn's your sister, but in retrospect, I can see some similarities. Not physical ones, but similarities a mother would see from knowing her child. It's probably why Johanna trusted you with her daughter despite your age difference. As for Red...yes. He is your father. I promise you, I will explain everything in the morning, but you need some sleep."

Ash took a deep breath and shifted a bit, his eyes opening and closing. "It's not over. What Giovanni's doing. Don't let anyone think we won. We didn't." His voice trailed off as he drifted to sleep.

Delia stared at her son with greedy eyes, running a hand through his hair that had been matted and dirty when he was brought in. For cleanliness sake, the nurses had washed it along with the rest of him. Delia was horrified to see all the new scars, but he was still alive, so she could accept them.

His black hair that was so much like his father's. A similar jawline and nose. Yes, if someone

knew, Ash certainly looked like the father he was asking about. The similarities ended there. His eyes were hers, his skin tone her father's, and his personality all his own.

Delia hated the fact that he came back this person who was shaken and broken, but he was still her boy. He was still the one that she let go because she knew that he had a bigger destiny than hiding with the rest of them as they claimed they made progress.

A part of Delia was afraid that he'd be angry in the morning, but a part of her had also accepted that he would be. For so long, she had hidden so many things from him in the name of protecting him. That was why she had to be honest. She had to tell him everything.

No, not just him. There were two others that deserved answers as well, but for now, they all needed some sleep. It could wait until tomorrow.

Though a cot had been brought in for her, Delia stayed in the chair beside her son, letting her head rest on the bed as she held his hand. She stayed like that as she drifted off into a peaceful sleep for the first time in months.

...

Leaf couldn't help but feel jealousy creeping through her veins as she watched Gary talk to his grandfather. The two were walking a few paces ahead of her and her mother, standing close together and talking enthusiastically. It was a rather sweet sight, if Leaf was being honest, since she knew just how much Gary had missed his grandfather.

She glanced out of the corner of her eye and watched her mother walk silently beside her, keeping her eyes forward and about three feet of space between the two of them. Leaf didn't want her mother to be hugging her as they walked down the hall or anything, but it would have been nice to feel like more than a stranger. The woman hadn't even told her where they were going when she came to get her this morning.

They didn't have time for cryptic parents unfortunately. They still had a water orb to locate, and Blackthorn City probably wasn't where Manaphy was going to show up with it.

She had to admit, she was intrigued when they went into the medical wing portion of the base (that went much farther underground than she expected – having only stayed in the Dragon's Den the last time they were there). For a brief moment, she wondered why a place like this existed in Blackthorn City of all places, but then recalled that this was where Lance had grown up.

"Ash!" Gary exclaimed suddenly, startling her out of her thoughts. The boy rushed into the room that he and his grandfather had stopped by, and Leaf immediately took off after him. She skidded to a stop by the door and saw their friend sitting up on a hospital bed, his mother sitting beside him as a nurse checked on the IV that was in his arm. Relief overwhelmed her, and Leaf walked towards him.

Ash's eyes turned towards her, and he said, "I'm glad you guys are okay."

"Us?" Gary gaped at their friend, not paying attention to the nurse as she left. "You were the one that was kidnapped!" He snorted. "Worrying about us. Really."

"What happened?" Leaf asked as she stood beside Gary.

"Well...uh..." Ash suddenly looked awkward and glanced towards his mother, who smiled encouragingly. "They were trying to use Dawn and I to get Red to talk."

"Red? As in the Pokémon Master?" Gary wondered, raising an eyebrow.

To Leaf, Ash's statement sounded strange. Whenever he used to talk about Master Red, he would say his name with such reverence that it would make her roll her eyes. Now though, it almost sounded like he was talking about something particularly unpleasant that he had stepped on.

"Why you and Dawn?" Leaf knew that her question was the right one when she saw the raven-haired boy scowl. Professor Oak closed the door behind them.

"So, remember how we always joked that there was this connection between you two? Blue and Green's kids?" He nodded towards Leaf's mother. "Apparently I do fit into that. Mom used to go by the name Yellow, and Red's my father." He paused to let that sink in. "Oh, and Dawn's my half-sister."

"What?" Gary and Leaf both asked together after a moment of stunned silence.

Delia sighed and said, "Maybe we should have told you before, but you have to understand that it was for your protection at one point. This story...all three of you deserve to know. I don't...where do we even start?"

"The beginning," Amanda said, breaking her silence. Everyone looked at her. "We start at the beginning."

...

10-year-old Amanda Green peered around the thick trees, watching two boys argue back and forth. One was tall with caramel hair and deep blue eyes, while the other was rather short with black hair and crimson eyes. She had no idea what they were arguing about, but she really wanted them to get a move on so she could do what she came to do.

"John! Jack!" She squeaked and ducked down in her hiding place as a stern voice came from the building. She peered out and saw the tall form of the renowned Professor Oak make his way towards them. "Enough. If you insist on fighting with one another, be productive. Having a battle between your two Pokémon is a great way to get started."

Pokémon? That caught her attention. Amanda leaned forward a little more and watched as the two tossed their Pokéballs into the air, revealing a Bulbasaur and a Charmander. For some reason, she expected the boy with red eyes to have the Charmander and the boy with blue eyes to have perhaps a Squirtle, but there was really no reason to think that.

A part of her had been hoping the Bulbasaur would still be there, but a Squirtle would suit her needs just fine. As Professor Oak watched the two boys battle, Amanda slipped around the back of his lab and peered into a window. There, on the table, was a single Pokéball that she knew must contain the last Pokémon.

Carefully, she opened the window and pulled herself inside, somersaulting onto the floor and peering around to see if there was anyone watching. Seeing no one, she darted forward and grabbed the Pokéball. She checked, and sure enough, it was labeled with the name 'Squirtle'. Quickly, she rushed to the window and climbed out of it.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Amanda jumped, completely startled as she looked around. The blue-eyed boy was glaring at her, while the red-eyed boy was staring at the Pokéball.

They knew she had taken it.

A smirk spread across her face as she winked at them. "See you later, boys!" She ignored their yells as she took off towards the trees.

They would never catch her, but Amanda got the feeling that she'd run into them again.

....

"So the rumours were true?" Leaf interrupted the story from where she sat beside Ash on the bed. He had scooted over to make some room for her. Gary sat on the end of it, watching the adults with unwavering interest. "You are a thief?"

"Yes," Green admitted without any hesitation. "I've done a lot of questionable things over the years. Things that Red and Blue would never do but someone had to. I don't regret it." Something odd flashed across her eyes. "Well, most of it." She shook her head. "The point is, from the very beginning, our lives, our destinies were intertwined. We didn't know how much right then and there. It was honestly surprising how often our paths crossed as the two boys fought over who would be the better trainer, who would collect the most Pokédex entries since it was the first test run of them. Unfortunately, I was influenced more than I should have been by Team Rocket at that time, but I never actually joined them. I was tempted to."

Amanda thought for a moment before a bitter smile crossed her features as she looked at Ash.

...

"Green, I think I'm in love," Red gushed as he flopped to the ground beside her.

"No I will not go out with you," she said instantly, not even bothering to hear the rest of it because honestly, Red gushing over something he was excited about was nothing new at all. The boy really needed to calm down.

"Not you." He sounded almost offended before his face turned into an awestruck one again. "She's so amazing! A kick-ass trainer and her orange hair is so bright and her pale green eyes are amazing."

"Don't write poetry for a living," she said sarcastically, but then the description prompted an image to appear in her mind. "Wait, are you talking about Misty?"

"Isn't her name great?"

"Misty Waterflower? The Gym Leader? The one whose Gyarados you have right now?"

"Yeah. Her."

Green blinked before laughing, almost in tears by his angry expression. "Talk about out of your league," she managed to choke out.

"She is not! You wait and see! I'll beat the Elite Four and the Champion!" Red sounded so sure of himself as he puffed out his chest.

"You're starting to sound like Blue." She poked him in the chest and he breathed out like a deflating balloon. "She's like two years older than you."

"Love knows no age."

"Right." Green rolled her eyes. "You're ridiculous, you know that?" She stood up and stretched out

her arms. "Though, I suppose we're heading over that way anyway. Blue did ask us to meet him by Saffron City, and we need to go through Cerulean to get there. Not for long though. He sounded pretty serious about whatever was going on there."

"Yeah, yeah." Red stood up, grabbing his bag as they started to walk. "He's probably just being dramatic about whatever it is."

...

"He wasn't," Green told them with a sigh. "What Blue found there – well – we took too long to get there and Red felt horrible about it. It turned out Team Rocket, which I had gotten away from by this point, had taken over enough of the city. They were looking into the early plans of the Magnet Train, or so the public knew. That was only part of it. It was all about Silph Co. Madame Boss, who used to run Team Rocket then, wanted something and sent her son, Giovanni, to get it. We didn't know that then."

Her eyes turned to the floor, suddenly appearing ashamed. "Blue went ahead of us when we didn't show up. He disguised himself as a Rocket Grunt and Red didn't know it was him. He attacked first and asked questions later. To be fair on Red's part, we had been fighting Rocket Grunts for a while at that point. He didn't mean..."

"What did he do?" Gary asked, his hands gripping the sheets.

"Red accidentally injured Blue's Raticate very badly before we realized who he was. It took too long to get him to the Pokémon Center, and it's not like now how Pokémon can survive almost anything in their Pokéballs, like they're in a state of suspended animation and can heal a bit. If a Pokémon was poisoned, the poisoned wreaked havoc on them in the Pokéballs. If they bled... well...they bled. And Raticate bled too much. I helped Blue, and Red went on. I don't know what happened, but I do know that by the end of it Red won, and he was never the same."

"He blamed himself for Raticate," Ash guessed.

Green nodded her head. "He did. He blamed himself for wanting to stop to see Misty. For putting a silly crush first and not believing Blue when something was going on. After that Red just... vanished."

"Vanished? What happened to him?" Leaf asked. She had never heard of this before.

"We didn't know. All we knew was that his Pikachu found his way back to Professor Oak with his Pokédex, and then..." Green's eyes turned to Delia's.

"I was the only one his Pikachu liked," Delia said. "My father was good friends with Professor Oak, and I really admired Red growing up. A silly school-girl crush really. I got his Pikachu, and his Pokédex, and I left to find him. Back then I was known as Yellow, for my hair." She tugged at her auburn locks, and Ash looked at her curiously. "When I was pregnant, I was actually worried you'd be born with blond hair. I had altered mine permanently, but you could still have been blond."

"You would have looked so weird as a blond," Gary noted. Ash couldn't help but agree.

"Anyway, I traveled with Green and Blue for a little bit, but continued on my own when we couldn't agree on which way to go."

"You pretty much replaced Red," Green confirmed. "Much better company too."

Delia smiled slightly at that. "I found Red, and there was something wrong with him. It was like... he wasn't there anymore. Like something was controlling him. I...fixed that."

"You hit him over the head with a rock," Professor Oak clarified.

"I hit him over the head with a rock," Delia confirmed sheepishly, and the three kids gaped at her. "It was either that or fight his Charizard. Besides, it worked."

...

"What happened?" Red groaned as he opened his eyes. "I feel like I got hit by a bus."

"Not a bus," Yellow said, startling him. "I hit you with a rock."

Red blinked at her, studying her with pure confusion before he sat up and looked around. "Where am I? Pikachu?" He looked down at his Pokémon as he ran over, and then glanced at Yellow's female Pikachu. "What the hell?"

"You vanished," Yellow explained to him. "And I managed to convince Professor Oak and my father to let me take your Pikachu and your Pokédex to come find you."

"Vanished? I don't remember..." he trailed off, his face going blank.

Yellow's hand curled around a stone that was on the ground beside her, just in case she needed to knock him out again.

"Shit!" he cursed, suddenly slamming his hand on the ground. "Fuck!" He peaked over at her and realized how young she was. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Yellow said with a shrug. "What's wrong?"

Red hesitated, like he didn't want to share his burdens with someone so young. Yellow could read people easily though, and scowled at his hesitation. "Professor Oak trusted me with your Pokédex. Your Pikachu trusted me. Green and Blue trust me. I can take it."

The mention of his friends seemed to startle him, but he answered. "I let her get into my head. Madame Boss. Oh Arceus." He suddenly looked like he was going to be sick. "What have I done?" He leaned forward so that he was kneeling with his forehead pressed to the ground.

Yellow hesitated before slowly reaching a hand out and putting it on his head. "I don't...you don't know me but I'm from Pallet Town too. You were always one of the trainers I looked up to, and the person that I was talking to a few minutes ago wasn't you." She shook her head, even if he wasn't looking. "She was actually controlling you. It's not your fault."

"It is!" Red suddenly snapped up, startling her. "I agreed to help her! I thought...I thought we were going to make things right with the Pokémon League. I didn't even...oh Arceus."

Yellow had heard whispers from Green and Blue about corruption within the Pokémon League. With a revolving door of Champions until Lance had recently become Champion, there was little stability and those who would use that unstable power for personal gain took advantage of that.

Despite this understanding, that he wanted to do good and make things better, the pity party was really annoying her.

"Red?" He ignored her, still mumbling to himself wildly. "Red?" He didn't even look at her. "Red."

Both Pikachu looked at her and shrugged. Anger rushed through her, and her hand raised up in the air. "Red!" The loud crack of the palm of her hand meeting his cheek echoed through the air.

Yellow's face burned brightly when she realized that she had slapped Red across the face. Well, at least it got him to stop. She took a deep breath and let her anger fuel her words. "So you messed up? Big deal! We all mess up sometimes! All we can do is fix it! There are problems in the league. There are problems with Team Rocket. Let's change that!" Her bright brown eyes were lit with fire. "No point thinking about what you did when you can still make a difference now."

Red stared at her, and Yellow felt her cheeks burn even more. He suddenly laughed, sounding almost hysterical. "For a little kid, you're really smart," he managed to choke out.

Yellow scowled. "I'm not a little kid! And I'm going to help you!" When he looked like he was about to protest, her eyes narrowed, daring him to do it.

Red wisely chose to let it drop. He shook his head. "Alright kid. What's your name?"

She bristled a bit at being called a kid, but decided to let it slip. "Yellow. My name is Yellow."

...

"You actually..." Ash trailed off and stared at his mother in awe. "Wow." His mother met his father when the man was mind-controlled, knocked him out with a rock, slapped him, and lectured him. It actually made his story of being fished out of a river and slapped by Misty seem to be the norm rather than an oddity.

"We couldn't shrug her off," Green said, nudging Delia with a form of familiarity that made Leaf raise an eyebrow. She had never seen her mother act like that before.

"What happened next?" Gary asked.

"Well, I guess the short version is that Red decided the best way to tackle everything was through the Pokémon League. So he fought, he trained. The rest of us kept an eye on Team Rocket and ran some interference. Red beat Lance when he was only 15...a little under a year after I met him," Delia explained, rubbing her wrist nervously.

"He wasn't entirely business back then," Professor Oak spoke up. "He was quite taken with Misty, if I remember right."

"Oh, he was," Green agreed. "He still felt bad about what happened with Blue, so he tried to stay away from her, but Misty wasn't having any of that and tracked him down." She nodded at Ash. "Your Misty is so much like her aunt that it's actually a bit frightening. Well, your Misty is a bit more feminine, her aunt prided herself on being the 'Tomboyish Mermaid,' and your Misty has a god-awful temper in comparison, but they're very much alike. They started dating."

"Red had a grip on the Pokémon League," Professor Oak noted, "and was working to change things there. He caught wind that Team Rocket was growing in the shadows. Instead of a takeover like this, they worked on controlling the flow of money, entertainment and so much more. If it wasn't for Red getting rid of the moles inside the league and actually using the information that was collected, no one would have caught them."

"So we went at them," Green continued, forcing the three to face her again. "We took them out at the Game Corner. The same place they were just holding you, Ash. We fought them there, and we won. I did some things I wasn't exactly proud of, but it didn't matter because it was all for the better."

"Then it all changed again," Delia said, her shoulders slumping. "Red found Misty drowned in her pool at the gym."

Ash had heard of that before, and still found it ridiculous. "Misty says that they never found a reason why it would have happened. It didn't make sense to anyone then."

"She was right." Delia nodded at her son. "All of her Pokémon were away. What wasn't released publicly, even to her family, was the fact that a red R was found there. Madame Boss ordered that hit. She even admitted it."

"Red became a man possessed. He was obsessed with vengeance, and went after Team Rocket so hard that it was genuinely startling," Professor Oak admitted.

"I tried to talk some sense into him," Delia admitted. "Even after he caught Madame Rocket, he just wouldn't stop. As far as we knew, he had Team Rocket and he was just chasing ghosts... chasing power. He was becoming what he always feared. I...it was our mistake. Red was right, they weren't gone." Tears welled up in her eyes and she looked to the floor.

"Mom?" Ash asked slowly, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"Sorry, it's hard." She took a deep breath, and was honestly glad that her son's Pikachu wasn't in the room at the moment. "Someone we didn't know, who I suppose was Giovanni, wanted revenge. I was the youngest, the easiest target, so someone came after me. My Pokémon fought, my Pokémon lost. If it wasn't for Red I probably would have died just like—just like they did." Delia closed her eyes, the images of her poor Pokémon swimming across her mind, especially her poor Pikachu. "I couldn't...I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't face them. Professor Oak, Red, Green, Blue, and my father, all worked together to help me hide. Yellow was the only thing I had ever been known by. It's not like today when you have all of these check-ins, registrations, official IDs or anything. It was easy to get under the radar back then. I was just Yellow to the world, so Yellow had to go. I went back to my birth name, Delia Bosque. I permanently changed my hair. I vowed to never train Pokémon again."

"Mom." Ash shifted so he was as close to her as he could be while still being on the bed. "I—I never knew. I—"

"It's okay, sweetie," she assured him. "I was so happy to see how much you loved Pokémon. I always meant it when I wished you the best."

"How did you not freak out when Team Rocket showed up?" Ash asked, referring to the times she had met them.

"I did, a bit, but honestly they seemed really childish and disorganized at the time," Delia admitted, sounding ashamed of herself. "I just shrugged it off as some young people trying to bring it back and not truly succeeding. I should have been more suspicious, given everything else that happened."

"Life moved on," Green spoke up, wanting to continue the story to get it over with. "We all came back to Pallet Town, though Red spent most of his time at the Indigo Plateau and training to take on the Pokémon Master. Blue married his girlfriend that he had for a while, Hillary, and I dated a few people until I met a man named Kene."

"Dad," Leaf interrupted, her stomach sinking when her mother winced.

"I always did love Red," Delia interrupted, before Leaf could interrogate her mother. "He was..."

fond of me, but I knew he would never love me. Some people can fall in love more than once, some people can't. Red gave his whole heart to Misty in the year that they were together and nothing could replace that. That's why...sometimes it frightens me to see you with Misty." She nodded at her son, who seemed startled. "You might not realize it, but you're the same way. When you love something, you love it completely and it can't be replaced. That's what he was like. If something happened to your Misty, you'd probably be the same as him." Delia quickly held up a hand to stop his worried questions. "It's a good thing, it really is. Good things can be scary too."

"So, how did you end up with him then?" Gary asked, nodding towards Ash. "If Red was so in love with his Misty? How'd you end up Delia Ketchum?"

"Red was fond of me, and we decided to give it a shot. It was funny, really, that Hillary, Green, and I were all pregnant around the same time."

"We all know that it was just the faulty condoms," Green spoke up.

"Mom!" Leaf squeaked, more than a bit of hurt in her voice. Professor Oak cleared his throat and glared at the woman, who seemed to shrink down under the elderly man's gaze.

"I never said it was a bad thing," Green muttered quietly.

Delia shook her head and drew the attention back to her. "Red had just become the Pokémon Master when I found out I was pregnant. With how much he was changing and doing, he thought that his life was far too dangerous to involve a family. He already spent his spare time training on Mount Silver, so he decided to just...disappear there. Maybe he knew about more threats, I don't know. What I do know is that he didn't want us to struggle so he and I got married."

Ash's face went pale at the implication. His parents didn't get married because they loved one another. He had heard about how people treated unmarried, pregnant women in Pallet Town, and it was honestly disgusting. By marrying Red, or rather, Jack Ketchum, his mother avoided that social stigma and had access to Red's money.

He honestly felt like he wanted to throw up, and barely heard his mother say, "Once he knew we would be okay, he left and never looked back."

"That's not true," Ash broke in before he could stop himself. "He's been watching me all along. I know he has. Cynthia admitted that they used a League Sweeper to stop me from winning in Sinnoh. She didn't want to but someone told her to. Who else could do that? He did!" Anger rushed through him. He had known about this before, but knowing that it was his own father made it even worse.

"Red was right to stay away," Green spoke up, startling them all. "Your Misty's parents were killed. Red said that it was a message to him, a warning." At Delia's harsh look, she added, "I'm sorry we never told you. We didn't want to involve you again even though we had suspicions that someone else from Team Rocket was around – someone dangerous. Perhaps we should have. It may have changed things." She looked down. "I was so stupid about the whole thing."

"Mom?" Leaf asked, hesitantly.

"We were always on the lookout for strangers, for suspicious people, but I let the enemy in." Amanda Green's bitter smile made them all shudder. "Your father, Leaf, was a horrible, horrible man hiding behind a perfect smile."

"What?"

"Gary..." Professor Oak spoke up, hesitating a bit.

Gary looked at his grandfather for a moment, green eyes so much like his mother's calculating, until his face went slack. "No."

"I'm sorry."

"No!" he yelled, standing up from the bed. He stared at his grandfather with wide eyes before looking towards Green. "He didn't! They didn't!"

"He did," Green said bluntly. "Your parents and your aunt, didn't die in an accident. Kene killed them."

Leaf's hand clasped over her mouth and she suddenly felt like throwing up. Her father, the person she had a couple good memories of from when she was younger, had killed Gary's parents and aunt? He had taken Professor Oak's entire family away? Hell, if Gary wouldn't have been with her and Ash that day, he probably would have died too.

"What—why—what happened to him?" The words came out of Gary so harshly that it sounded like he was being strangled.

"He's dead," Green informed them, as if talking about the weather. "He had a bleeding disorder. I never knew. When I confronted him, I injured him and he bled out."

Leaf jerked to the side, and luckily enough there was a garbage can right there as she lost her breakfast into it. Her father had killed Gary's family. Her mother had killed her father. So many people had died because of Team Rocket's actions and they had never known.

"Maybe this wouldn't be happening if we managed to truly stop them back then," Delia said sadly. "Instead of leaving a possible enemy out there because we were tired and scared."

"His mother," Ash spoke up, startling everyone. "He kept talking about his mother. He thought you guys killed her. That's what started this." He suddenly burst into hysterical laughter, pulling his knees up to his chest and leaning his forehead on them. It wasn't a laugh of humour, it was the laugh of someone who didn't know what else to do or say. "That's what started this. It made him worse than he was and it grew over the years. You guys started this."

He was absolutely right, Delia knew that now. If Red and Lance had held a public trial for Madame Rocket, maybe it wouldn't have had the same results. Just like Red snapped when he thought there needed to be change when his loved one was taken from him without really knowing what happened, Giovanni had done the same.

Now their kids were the ones suffering the consequences.

"I—I can't," Gary said, waving his hands in the air. "I need to...I need to go." He took off out the door without another word.

Professor Oak sighed and stood up, looking like he had aged ten years since the talk had started. He nodded at them, but said nothing else as he left the room.

"That's why you can't look at me, isn't it?" Leaf managed to choke out as she glared at her mother. "That's why you can barely stand me. I look like you, but I have his hair colour. His eyes. That's why, isn't it?" Green didn't have to answer, her guilty expression said to all. Leaf wanted to throw the trashcan of vomit at her, but instead got to her feet and stormed out of the room with it. Just because she was angry with her mother didn't mean she was going to let Ash deal with the smell of

her vomit all day.

"She didn't take that very well," Green said as she stood up.

"She's always known you're a shitty mother," Ash said bluntly, "now she just knows why." He didn't know why his words made Green wince, but they did. She said nothing else as she left the room.

It was silent for a few moments until Delia said, "I'm sorry, Ash. We were foolish to think it was over, that we could hide from it all. Maybe we didn't want to see it. I know I didn't. I guess...the peaceful times make us blind."

"I—" He wanted to be angry at his mother, but all the fight drained completely out of him. He understood. Hell, his mother was easily the most innocent out of the four of them. He could see that. A girl who loved someone that didn't love her, who just wanted to make the world right, and was scarred for it. She had as little choice over her fate as he did.

Ash turned and looked at his mother, seeing the unshed tears in her eyes. This time, he reached out and wrapped his arms around her, even if it tugged at his IV a bit. "It's...it's not okay mom. None of it is, but it's not your fault. I get it. I forgive you."

Delia closed her eyes as she shifted from the chair and to the bed, hugging her son close. This time she took comfort from his embrace.

She had never been more proud of him.

...

Ash stared at the ceiling, unable to get back to sleep despite the fact that the doctor insisted he should. Something about exhaustion, blood loss, malnourishment (since his eating habits had been atrocious as of late), and a head injury. He didn't feel tired though. In fact, he could barely remember the last time he had been so awake and aware, with so many thoughts flying through his head.

Pokémon Master Red was his father, Jack Ketchum. He almost wanted to laugh over the fact that his mother had once shrugged off his father as a dead-beat trainer. She wasn't wrong, just not in the way he thought.

Red was his father, and his mother had helped take down Team Rocket before only to lose all of her Pokémon and even herself. His father had never loved her. He had loved Misty's aunt who was long gone as well. Still, he had married Delia in order to provide for her and their son.

Ash shifted over onto his side, careful to not pull his IV. He already knew that his mother had never taken advantage of Red's money. He had grown up with a simple life, though in retrospect his mother never had to work as much as she should have to provide for a child. It allowed her to spend more time with him.

Not that a little bit of money made up for the presence of a father.

He did try to close his eyes, but they opened again when his mind turned to his blue-haired friend that Giovanni and Red both claimed as his sister. He frowned a little bit and looked over his shoulder to make sure that his mother wasn't in the room with him anymore.

Slowly, he pushed himself up out of the bed and swung his feet over the side, honestly glad that Pikachu wasn't there at the moment since his friend would no doubt try to keep him in bed. There

was something really important that he had to do.

His footsteps were steady, and he didn't wobble at all like when he had gotten up to go to the washroom earlier. He held onto the wheeled stand that his IV was attached to and made his way towards the door, closing his eyes and reaching out with his Aura. It took him only seconds to realize that the nurses there were distracted, no doubt with Red since he was far worse off.

It made his escape an easy one.

He stalked through the halls silently, following the bright pink aura that he was looking for.

It didn't take Ash long to find Dawn. He peered through the door quietly, relieved to see that she was awake. He winced when he saw how heavily bandaged her hands were, but at least she didn't seem to be in any sort of pain anymore.

She must have heard the sound of the metal stand he wheeled along with him, since her head snapped towards him. Blue eyes studied him for a moment before a warm smile appeared on her face. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Me?" Ash was completely taken back as he came in. "You're the one who..." He trailed off as guilt rushed through him. He had been the one to crash into Dawn, knocking her into the acid.

As if reading his mind, the younger teenager scowled at him. "Listen here, Ash Ketchum. You didn't do this." She nodded to her hands. "Team Rocket did. It's all them."

Ash decided not to argue. He wanted to, but he knew just how stubborn she could be. It was almost as stubborn as—

He cut his own thoughts off with a snort as he sat on the edge of her bed.

"What?"

"You're just as stubborn as me," Ash said. Dawn raised an eyebrow at him before her lips formed an O as she realized what he was getting at.

Apparently siblings who didn't even know they were half-siblings could share common traits.

"Do you think...do you think he was telling the truth?" Dawn asked, her eyes shining with both hope and fear.

"I don't know. I know he's a shitty person who never loved my mom and married her because of me," Ash admitted, his voice dry and almost sarcastic, though he was entirely serious. "Anything else...I don't know." What he did know was that it wasn't his place to tell Leaf and Gary's stories.

Dawn frowned, focused on her hands before her eyes flitted up to him. "Help me up."

"What? No! Your hands..."

"Aren't getting any better overnight," she finished for him, swinging her legs off the side of the bed. She wrapped her arm around the stand that her IV was on. "Look, my hands...my skin will heal eventually. They'll be scarred and kind of ugly, but I'll live. It's just..." She took a deep breath. "I can deal with this type of thing. I need to know though. I need to know if what he said was true. Can you find him?"

Ash eyed her, and figured that she'd go with or without him, so he might as well go with her. He

nodded, and led the way out of the room so that he could keep an eye out for anyone coming their direction. They must have looked like a sight, two kids wandering around in pajamas, both wheeling metal poles with medicine bags hanging off of them.

Slowly, he came to a stop at a door. He expected there to be all kinds of security around Red, but there was no one else there. He could feel it. He could also tell that the man was conscious. This was probably their best bet to get some form of answers from him.

Taking a deep breath, Ash forced every bit of bravery he had left to the surface and opened the door. His brown eyes met deep crimson as Red turned towards the door, the man's eyes shifting towards Dawn as she came into the room behind Ash, closing the door quietly.

A thick, heavy silence plagued the room.

Red sighed. "I thought you'd come."

"Is it true?" Dawn asked him bluntly. "Are you...are you really..."

"Your father? Yes." He nodded. "I was in Sinnoh. It was...rather unintentional."

"You don't say?" Ash quipped. "Not like being married to my mom mattered, right?"

Red chose not to rise to that accusation, keeping his eyes trained on Dawn. "I knew about you though. I already had so many security measures in place to hide Ash, that I knew it would be suspicious if I did it to another child. So I found a way to send money without being traced, to help support you."

"Money?" Dawn repeated, unable to believe just how satisfied he sounded with himself. "I didn't need money. My mom was a Top Coordinator. I wanted my father. Not the...revolving door of men my mom dated when she was younger." She snorted. "Money to cover up an accident, right?"

"Dawn," Ash said, putting a hand on her shoulder. He could feel her stressed aura pulsing around her, and didn't like it very much. "You should go back to your room. You're too tired and the medicine isn't helping."

She looked like she wanted to protest, but slowly nodded her head in agreement. She thought that she could deal with this right now, but she couldn't. "I'll be okay on my own."

"You sure?" Ash wanted to go with her, but he also wanted to get some answers while the man couldn't avoid him.

Dawn nodded and left the room after casting a glare towards Red.

Ash kept his focus on her until she got down the hall, and then looked towards Red, who was not watching him with interest.

"That was something that was never in any files on you," Red noted, his voice not nearly as hoarse or quiet as when they were in Team Rocket's base. "Those powers of yours. How'd that escape our notice?"

"Not everyone's a douchebag." Okay, Ash hadn't meant to start out in such a hostile way, but he could roll with this. "Not everyone takes advantage of a girl that loves them, then leaves her after knocking her up and marrying her just to cover his tracks, before running off and getting another woman pregnant and abandoning that kid too."

"You don't understand," Red answered calmly, not denying any bit of it.

Any one of Ash's friends would have said that it took a lot to get him truly angry. Sure, he was known for small pouts of annoyance and disapproval, but as he grew up, he had a pretty mild temper. The catch was that when he got mad, he erupted like a volcano.

"No, I don't!" he snapped, taking a step forward. "I'm glad I don't! I—you...you were my hero, you know that? Pokémon Master Red. You were always who I wanted to be but...what you did to mom, to Johanna...and back there, you were going to let them torture Dawn. You were going to let them kill her!"

"It's difficult to understand. Sometimes we have to put the greater good above all else, even if it seems cruel. I have access to so much information that Giovanni could not get his hands on. The good of the many always outweighs the good of the one. You wouldn't understand that yet. Though you may if you become the Master someday."

Ash wanted to punch him, but instead just curled his hand into a fist. "Are you...screw you! What the hell? You could save her and save everyone! It's not an either-or! Who the hell says you can't do both?"

"You cannot. The Pokémon Master must always put the greater good above all else. It's the most important thing, even more than those you love."

"So what you're saying is that I could only have one? Not both?"

"I tried, and I failed."

Ash thought about the stories he heard about Misty's aunt, and anger rushed through him again. If it was true and his Misty was a lot like her, he just knew that the senior Waterflower would have hated that outlook on life. She would have despised that her demise made Red so cynical.

Shaking his head, the teenager took a step back and looked away. "I used to admire you, you know. Pokémon Master Red, you were my hero. You'd think it'd make me excited to know that you were my father. You know, seven years ago, it probably would have. Now...you're just...sad and alone." Ash took a step towards the door. "You got strong Pokémon. You got...subjects. You've got the top title. That's it."

It occurred to him exactly what he was saying, and the thought made his gut twist uncomfortably. All his life he had wanted to become the world's greatest Pokémon master, but here he was, casting aside his hero without any regrets.

Ash looked at him again. "I won't be you. I'm not going to pick one or another. I pick everyone and everything, and if you think that's not possible, you're just as much of a problem as Team Rocket is."

It might have appeared cowardly, but he had to get out of there. Maybe it was the realization that he was rejecting his lifelong dream of becoming a Pokémon master, and rejecting the childish dream of who he once thought his father could be. Neither of those things were what he thought they were.

Panic ripped through him, and he tried to shove it down, but he felt like something had wrapped its hands around his throat. He forced himself to move one foot in front of the other, practically slamming Red's door behind him. He managed to take a few steps before he stumbled to the wall, trying to calm himself.

A warm hand landed on his shoulder. "Deep breath in, Ash. Hold it for a bit, then slowly let it out. Keep repeating that. It'll be okay."

Ash followed the instructions as they were repeated, before he could actually focus on the person standing before him. Relief washed over his features as his eyes met Brock's.

"Come on big guy," Brock said, reaching out to loop Ash's free arm over his shoulder, helping to steady his friend. "Let's get you back to your room before the nurses or your mom come looking for you. Or Misty." He shuddered a bit, and Ash cracked a small smile.

When they got back, Ash flopped so that he was sitting on the side of his bed. He watched as Brock sat down beside him, watching him carefully as if he were about to break. Then again, he had just found him having a minor panic attack.

"I'm okay now," Ash assured him, taking in his friend's features. He hadn't seen Brock since Christmas, not face to face, and it had been far too long. He had missed his friend desperately during their journey. "You look different," he blurted out.

A small smile ticked up on Brock's face. "So do you."

"I look like crap," Ash pointed out, knowing that he had to.

"Not as bad as when they dragged you in. They kept you asleep for a few days before you woke up." Okay, that was news to the younger boy, who had thought he was asleep for only a couple hours before waking up to his mother. Without warning, Brock's face took on a concerned, fatherly expression. "Hey, I'm sorry, about back at the base. When I found you guys...I just—"

"Are you apologizing for paying attention to Dawn, who was super injured, over me?" Ash quirked an eyebrow at him.

Brock's words died in his throat and he chuckled. He once again clapped his hand on Ash's shoulder. "I missed you. Why don't you catch me up on everything that happened? I heard it from Misty, but I'd like to hear it from you too. We both know she gets dramatically protective."

That was a very good way to put it. Even so, Ash shifted uncomfortably. Telling Brock what they were doing was easy enough, but the parts about him abandoning their friends (even if he was physically there) made him uncomfortable. The thought of his mother and that man down the hall made him uncomfortable. The IV in his arm made him uncomfortable. Everything did.

It must have shown on his face, because Brock was quick to back down. "Don't worry about it. We can talk when you're ready."

"Thanks," he answered honestly. "What's been going on here?"

Brock quickly launched into an explanation of everything that had been happening on his end. From meeting Max, to going to Blackthorn, to getting involved with the G-Men, to meeting Madame Rocket herself, to his parents dying, to Lucy saving his siblings and bringing them there. Though he hadn't travelled far and wide, a lot had happened that left Ash surprised.

Ash was about to ask more questions, when the doctor came in to check him over.

"I'll talk to you later, okay? If I spot Misty, I'll send her your way," Brock assured him, standing up and stretching a bit before heading to the door. He paused and looked back. "I mean that, that I'll see you later. I'll be with you every step of the way, got it?"

Warmth rushed through Ash. Of course Brock would insist on going with Ash when he left, because they did need to leave. There was one orb left, and Brock had never let him down before.

"Thank you." The sincerity in his voice made the elder of the two pause at the door before nodding and continuing on.

...

Iris didn't know if she was supposed to be in the medical wing of the base, but she figured that it was better to ask forgiveness than permission. She could claim innocence as long as she didn't actually know the rules.

She tucked herself into a corner when Ash and his mother walked by, relieved to see the boy up and looking better than he had the last time she saw him. He wasn't who she was looking for though, not yet.

Silently, she ran through the hall, checking one door after another until she finally came upon Dawn. Knocking on the opened door, Iris smiled with amusement as the girl jumped.

"Up for a visitor?" Iris asked, smiling broadly at Dawn's cross expression that lasted only a few seconds before fading.

"Sure." Dawn nodded, and the other girl hurried in, plopping herself onto the side of the bed. "So, what's up?"

"What's up, she says." The purple-haired girl shook her head. "You tell me! How do you feel?"

"I..." Dawn's smile faded and she looked at her hands. "I'm glad the medicine works so quickly. I know it's been a few days, but I was worried it'd be all raw and painful for months. It—it still hurts but...well...it may be stupid but other things hurt worse right now."

"Like what?" Iris asked. Her expression was concerned and open, and Dawn knew that she wasn't trying to pry. She just wanted to be there if her friend needed her. Dawn thought about just saying that she didn't want to talk, but changed her mind.

"Apparently Pokémon Master Red is my father," she blurted out dryly.

Iris stared at her blankly. "What?"

"Yeah. Oh, he's also Ash's father and is actually married to his mother. Real name's Jack Ketchum."

"What?" Iris asked again, her voice louder.

"My thoughts exactly," Dawn agreed with a nod.

"Wait! Hold up! So that means you and Ash are...you know what? I'm not even surprised," the purple-haired girl sighed and shook her head.

"What?" It was Dawn's turn to ask, her voice peppered with confusion.

"Don't get me wrong," Iris started, "you look nothing alike. It's just...you have the same attitude about a lot of things and I know that doesn't always make people related, but you do. You have similar reactions and quirks to your personalities. You both also get the exact same dumbfounded look on your faces when you're confused! You tilt your head and everything!"

"May does that too," Dawn pointed out almost defensively. She could remember that because she always thought May looked adorable when she did that. "A lot of people do."

"You two are much more dramatic about it!" Iris waved her hands in the air. "You know what's funny? I'm really not surprised that if you had to have a long-lost half-brother, that it's Ash. We – he – gets jerked around by things all the time."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"You were from separate regions. You probably would have gone your entire lives without meeting if he didn't travel there. But he did and one of the first people he ran into was you. What are the odds without some freaking divine intervention?" Iris put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Don't be upset that Ash is your big brother who is still very much a kid."

"Oh!" Dawn seemed surprised by that. "Oh no, I'm not upset about that. I'm upset to find out that my father's a two-timing asshole that doesn't care about anything but the 'bigger picture' and the 'greater good.' He would have let both of us die. I knew he couldn't be a great guy because Mom never once spoke about him, but I didn't expect that." She shook her head, a soft smile appearing on her face. "Ash though...he's always been my big brother in every way that mattered. So we're biologically related on our father's side. Who cares? Blood doesn't have to define family at all. It's neat that there's the biological connection there, but it doesn't make a difference. Family's so much more than blood relations. I mean, you're my family too. So is May, Misty, Brock, and everyone else." She nodded her head firmly.

Iris stared at her and smiled softly. "You're right." Sometimes Iris forgot that she did have a family, one that had recently grown and would grow again when she got to know Ash's other friends. It was one of the biggest perks to being friends with him.

...

Dawn's second visitor came down the hall without even trying to be sneaky. She held her head high as people glanced at her, turning and leaning on the young girl's open door, waiting until she noticed her.

"L—Leaf?" Dawn stuttered. Though the two of them certainly did talk, the brunette wasn't the first person that she'd go to for a conversation, and she was a bit surprised to see her.

"Hey." Leaf walked over to her. "How are you feeling?"

Dawn got the feeling that she'd be getting this question a lot. She shrugged and said, "Hands hurt a bit."

Leaf snorted, her lips tipping up into a grin. "That's probably the world's biggest understatement." Her smile vanished, her brow pinching seriously. "At least our technology lets it heal a ton faster. It's not like when even my mom was younger. They wouldn't have had things exactly like that."

"Yeah," Dawn agreed. "The machines and medicines are amazing. I have movement in my hands again already, though it does still hurt. Doctors said that the burns weren't deep, which is good." She stared sadly at her bandaged hands.

Leaf plopped down in the seat beside her. "That's good! Why are you hiding them though? Your hands?" She nodded at the way Dawn tucked her bandaged hands beneath the blankets of her bed.

"Oh, well..." the younger girl looked away. "The bandages...you know...and I...well...the skin is going to – I mean – you see...it'll never heal properly." She shook her head. "My palms are going

to be sensitive, and the scars are permanent unless I go through some form of surgery. They just look...so ugly."

Though Dawn wasn't looking at her, Leaf's expression softened. She reached out and put a hand on her arm, startling the blue-haired girl. Dawn looked up at her, and Leaf said, "You're strong. One day they won't bother you. Until then..." She trailed off, peeling her newly-cleaned gloves off of her hands. "Until then, you don't have to be okay with your hands. You can cover them until you feel ready to show them. There's no shame in that." She set her gloves on the bed in front of Dawn.

"Leaf." Dawn's eyes started to tear up. "You don't have to—"

"I did," Leaf interrupted. "You keep those bandages on, there's more medicine in them so it'll heal. When you have to take them off to let your hands heal naturally, you can wear these gloves when you're traveling. They're clean." Logically, she knew that Dawn could have bought her own, but this still seemed like the right thing to do.

Dawn gingerly picked up the gloves, careful with how she moved her hands. "Thank you, Leaf. Thank you."

"Anytime."

...

When her third visitor knocked on her door, Dawn was almost angry. It was nice to know that people cared about her, but she would have liked to have been left alone for a while. She wanted to rest. She wanted to think. She wanted to wallow in self-pity on her own.

Twisting around with an annoyed greeting on her tongue, the thought instantly died when she caught sight of a pair of familiar brown eyes that were on a very different face than she was used to. Dawn almost jumped so that she was sitting straight, expression panicked.

"Mrs. Ketchum! I'm sorry!"

"Sorry? For what?" Delia asked, a gentle smile on her face as she walked into the room.

Dawn was about to say for almost being rude, but then more thoughts came into her mind. The woman sat so calmly, with a kind smile on her face, as if she didn't just find out that her estranged husband had cheated on her.

Then again, he was estranged, so maybe it didn't matter all that much to her. Dawn doubted that though. Delia had a lot of heart, just like Ash. She suddenly felt like she had a lot to apologize for.

"Well I...your husband..."

"Oh, sweetie, no." Delia held up a hand and waited, but when Dawn didn't shrink away she set it on her shoulder. "You did nothing wrong at all. It was Red. It always was. You can't blame a child for the sins of a parent." The woman smiled at her warmly. "If anything, I'm glad such a sweet, fiery girl came from it. The world needs more people like you, and I know my son's life would be lacking if he didn't know you."

Dawn's breath caught in her throat, and this time tears spilled from her eyes. It had nothing to do with her terribly scarred hands or the physical pain this time. "Thank you," she choked out.

Delia smiled at her. "Your mom won't be able to come from Sinnoh, but I'll stay with you. You won't be alone."

She stared with wide eyes. "You will?"

"Of course! You're Ash's friend. You're his sister. Technically, I'm your stepmother." That startled Dawn, but it was true, wasn't it? "You're family."

That was too much for the young teenager. It was so easy to see where Ash's good heart came from. It wasn't the planning of legendary Pokémon or anything like that. No, it was a reflection of everything good that was within Delia Ketchum, who could suffer from never knowing what it was like to be truly loved, yet still love so fiercely herself. So much so that she could welcome the child created from her husband's infidelity with open arms.

She couldn't stop herself. Dawn lurched forward, letting herself cry in Delia's arms as the woman hugged her close. She cried for everyone that had suffered. She cried for her friends. She cried because of the situation. Mostly, she cried for herself.

...

Misty shivered slightly at the cool air that hit her skin, shifting closer to Ash. The boy insisted that he wanted to get outside for a little bit, so they managed to get permission to go out of the Dragon's Den, but they had to stay close, and there was someone watching them from outside.

Neither one of them said anything. They just sat side by side, staring up at the sky. Misty was fiddling with her shirt, when her hand brushed against the smooth stone hanging from around her neck.

"Oh!" She sat up straight, startling Ash a bit. He looked at her curiously. "Your keystone! Here!"

Misty was about to lift the cord over her head, and was startled when Ash stopped her. A small smile passed over his face and he said, "Keep it."

"What?" She blinked at him. "What about Ria? And Charizard?"

"If I really need it, I'll get it from you, but we're better off than most. Brock told me how you kicked ass earlier, how you saved the day with Mega Gyarados." He poked her cheek. "Keep it."

A small smile passed across her face as she leaned back onto him, nuzzling her face into his shoulder. They fell back into silence, but this time, Misty let her mind wander to places that she wished they hadn't. She wanted to think about the sweet gesture of her boyfriend giving her his mega stone, but another thought that had been plaguing her all night just wouldn't leave.

"What's wrong?" Ash asked, and Misty looked up at him, ready to say that there was nothing wrong at all. Her words died when she saw how serious he looked, and remembered that he could get an impression of her emotions through his Aura.

She sighed and said, "It's October."

"What? Since when?" He seemed so startled by that, having lost track of time a while ago.

"I know." For a brief moment she had an amused grin, but it quickly faded. "It's just... Violet's baby was due in November. I would already know if I had a niece or nephew. It would have been almost here."

Ash's shoulder slumped slightly, and his arm went around her, pulling her close to him. He didn't say anything, he just hugged her.

"I'm sorry," Misty said suddenly. "I shouldn't be complaining. You...you've gone through so much."

"Don't be dumb," he snapped without hesitation, leaning his cheek on top of her head. "I've got you."

Misty had to take several deep breaths to keep herself from crying as she hugged him, relishing the warmth of having him close. She had been so worried for him over the past few months, that sometimes she forgot that she could lean on him too, that he was there for her as much as she was there for him.

"Your family," he suddenly muttered, his body becoming tense. "Mist...there's something you need to know. It might not be the right time but I don't think there is one."

She knew from his tone that it must have been bad. So she shifted around so that she could be face to face with him, placing a hand on his cheek. "Tell me."

So he did. He told her everything about his parents, even adding in the parts about Leaf and Gary, since it was relevant to what happened to her own family. He even told her about Dawn, and how Red was ready to sacrifice Dawn in the Rocket base. Mostly though, he focused on her own family and what he had learned about them.

By the end of his story, Misty finally lost the battle with her tears. Streaks stained her cheeks, and her entire body was shaking as she tried to stifle her sobs. Ash reached out, pulling her to him and letting her rearrange herself so that she was sitting in his lap, curled up close to him.

Ash didn't try to shush her, and didn't try to stop her tears. He just sat there and let her cling to him as the revelation of what happened to her family washed over her. Misty was grateful for that. She wasn't ready to talk or hear someone talk to her.

A few minutes later, she moved so that she could talk. It took her a few deep breaths before she managed to start. "Grandma Rose never once believed that Aunt Misty died by accident. She was too good a swimmer. Too careful. Much more than me." She chuckled and wiped at her running nose on her hand. "You know what? I can be sad for my grandma for losing her children. And I'm sad because of why my parents and my aunt died, but...I'm still a horrible person."

"No you're not," Ash insisted.

"Yes, I am. Because I can't be really all that sad that she's gone. Misty, at least."

"You never knew her," he told her, rubbing her shoulder.

"That's not it. It's just...if she had lived maybe I would still be here. Maybe my parents would have been. Maybe I would be like my sisters, I don't know. What I do know is that you wouldn't be here. Instead, I'd probably have a Ketchum cousin. So while it's sad that my aunt died...if I went back right now and had to choose between saving her and letting her die, knowing that you would be born from it...I would let her." The last words came out as a choked sob of shame, but at the same time, she was very certain of what choice she would have made.

Ash closed his eyes for a moment before saying, "But we can't go back and change the past. You know it, and I know it. We lived it. They're gone, and we're here. I think...I don't know if I hate Red or not, but Dawn wouldn't be here if he hadn't have cheated on my mom, and he might not have cheated if he had stayed with us. If he was there, Dawn wouldn't exist. I can't imagine that. So that way, I'm glad." He paused. "Maybe we're both just bad people."

Misty snorted. "Well damn. I guess we'll just have to be bad people together for the rest of our lives."

He chuckled slightly. It wasn't a happy sound, because it wasn't a happy topic, but it was still genuine. "You know, I'm really glad I threw a pebble at that Spearow and wrecked your bike."

"Oh my Arceus," she breathed out and laughed almost hysterically. "You keep up with that sweet talk – about us both being bad people and beating a Pokémon with a rock and wrecking a bike – and I might decide that we need to stay here for good."

"The horror," Ash replied. He felt quite proud of himself because she wasn't crying anymore. She was sad, and that was understandable, but she wasn't quite as heartbroken as before. That was good enough for him for now.

Misty had been there for him through everything. The least he could do was be there for her.

...

"We've certainly gotten ourselves into a fine mess." Lance glanced over at Red, who was sitting up in his hospital bed, his eyes locked onto the wall in front of him, not even bothering to look at the Champion. He wasn't surprised, Red tended to do this; let other people think that he wasn't listening when he really was. It was a bit annoying though, as the pink-haired man paced back and forth across the room.

Red said nothing, so he continued. "Why the hell did you let yourself get captured? Why not run? I saw the footage. We recovered it."

"There was no time," Red answered, straightforward and unapologetic. "Get my Pokémon out. Hide and destroy anything Giovanni might use. Save myself. I couldn't do it all, so I chose the bigger picture."

Lance snorted in disbelief. "Always scheming, aren't you? You knew someone would come for you eventually. That's why you didn't just end yourself."

"People are predictable," the Master said.

The Champion stopped pacing and faced his long-time friend face on. "Well, I sure had a hell of a hard time trying to keep your boy safe like I said I would. That kid got in and out of regions with his friends that no other Champions or organizations could. Then, I find out he's apparently some prophesized Chosen One. I mean, if you think about it, it's like everything has been given to him. Powerful trainer? Check. Chosen One? Check. Special powers? Check. Father is the current Master? Check. Kid would have been spoiled rotten if he grew up with you. He has everything already."

"I'm sure others would think so if they knew," Red agreed. "Unless you ask him, of course. I dare say he'd disagree with that. This gossip isn't why you're here though. What did you really come to tell me?"

Lance really had wanted to talk about that, but Red was right. It wasn't really the reason he came there. "We brought her here. Madame Boss. We wanted info on Giovanni. She wanted out."

For the first time, Red's narrow, crimson eyes snapped up to Lance. "Did she tell you anything?"

"She's been surprisingly helpful with a couple things," Lance admitted, crossing his arms in front of him. "Could stand to open up to us more. And her name is Sylvia Rocketti."

"Sylvia," Red repeated thoughtfully. There was clearly already a plan forming in his mind. "What about those two that rescued the kids and I?"

"The ones that saved you, the son you secretly coddle in all the wrong ways, and the daughter I never knew about?" Lance wasn't normally this sassy with Red in recent years, but he couldn't help it. They were supposed to be best friends. Red just stared at him blankly, so he continued. "They're being held in a room. Not in the prisons. All the kids vouch for them. What do you want to do with them?"

"Use them," he answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "See if Madame Boss will open up to someone from Team Rocket. See if she'll say anything else. We have nothing to lose."

"Right," Lance nodded and headed towards the door, but paused. "One last thing. The kids were apparently on some mission for Arceus. Lugia basically confirmed that to me. What do you want me to do if they try to leave to finish it?"

Red thought momentarily. "Let them go. Track them carefully. Make them keep in contact with you."

"Let them do their thing, then swoop in and be the heroes in the end?" Lance shook his head at his own words. He knew how this worked. "Alright."

"It'll keep them safe," Red insisted.

Lance truly did care for his friend, and he generally agreed with him, but he really had to wonder what was going through his head at times, especially when it came to the kids that he had.

He knew better than to question it though. With a flourish of his cape, Lance turned and walked out of the room.

...

Jessie expected to be throw in a jail cell and treated with suspicion, so she was pleasantly surprised when that didn't happen. She knew that they were being closely watched, but that was alright. They got food, water, and a place to sleep, so that was good enough.

What she didn't expect was to be handed back her uniform, white shirt and all, though she had no idea how anyone got that. When she met up with James and Meowth, James had the same uniform she knew so well.

Then they were led down stairs and elevators, around twisting halls and thick steel doors. For a moment they were all nervous that they were just going to be tossed into a dark corner and left to rot. That feeling only intensified when Champion Lance Greyson stepped in front of them.

"You're going to do something for us," he said without any formalities or small talk. "Prove that you're an asset to us."

"What are we doing?" James asked, polite but seriously.

"You must have heard of Madame Rocket, right?"

"She was da boss' mother," Meowth noted, startling Jessie and James, who stared at him. "What? I was his Pokémon once. I knew."

"Hmm...you might be useful yet," Lance muttered, eyeing Meowth curiously, before turning to the two humans. "Sylvia Rocketti. Madame Boss. Whatever you want to call her. She's behind these doors." Both of their mouths fell open in shock. "We want to see what you can get out of her. Any more insight into Giovanni's motivations."

"Boss—I mean Giovanni was talking about you all murdering his mother," Jessie pointed out, putting a hand on her hip. "I'm pretty sure that's his biggest motivation outside of power."

That seemed to startle Lance a bit, like he never considered the fact that taking a woman away and not letting the world know what happened to her could impact someone's life. Jessie scoffed at his face. "We'll talk to her."

"You're being monitored," he warned. "Try to see if she can give us insight. Don't give her much info."

"That's it? You're just letting us go in without any sort of plan?" James asked incredulously.

"There's a plan." The unsaid words of 'they're just not included in it' echoed through the room. Instead, he stepped out of the way and nodded towards the door.

The trio exchanged nervous glances before slowly walking forward and into the room.

Whatever Jessie had been expecting, it wasn't to see a rather beautiful, regal woman sitting at a table. She looked towards them, cunning eyes instantly zeroing in on their shirts.

Sylvia Rocketti, or Madame Boss, raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow as she stared at them. "Well, this is certainly a treat. Brand new visitors. Your uniforms have gotten whiter."

Jessie instantly knew that this woman was secretly accusing them of not being from Team Rocket. So the younger woman lifted her chin into the air and said, "These are personal style choices. We're not going to blend in with the lesser people."

Sylvia eyed them and then chuckled. "You certainly are real Rockets, aren't you? Fascinating. I was not expecting them to go with this angle." She then glanced at Meowth. "And letting you bring in a Pokémon? Though it certainly is basic, isn't it?"

Crossing his arms as Jessie and James sat down, Meowth stared at the woman crossly. "Listen here old broad. This Meowth is not basic."

"I should say not." There was genuine surprise in Sylvia's eyes. "A Meowth that stands on his hind legs and speaks our language is certainly fascinating. Who are you?"

"My name's James Cathcart," the man spoke up. "Jessie Knox and Meowth are my partners. We used to work for RND. While searching for rare Pokémon too."

"He had you searching for rare Pokémon, yet he didn't take this Meowth?"

Meowth's ears twitched a bit. "Well I—I was his...but then he made me watch over these two." His ears flattened under her serious stare. "Da Boss was angry I couldn't use Pay Day."

Sylvia surprised them all by cackling at that. "What an idiot child. A one track mind. A Pokémon that can speak without telepathy is much more worthwhile than one that can use Pay Day. Everything I hear about this boy makes me question him." She then stared at James. "You had a well-off upbringing, didn't you? What led you to Team Rocket?"

"Uh...yes ma'am," James said, a bit taken back. "I had my reasons." His parents were insane.

She gave him a curt nod and looked at Jessie. "You girl, you're different. Orphanages, being on your own, waiting for a mother who would never come."

Jessie suppressed a shudder and the desire to ask how she knew, but it occurred to her, that his woman would have known her mother, Miya Knox. Her mother had been a part of Team Rocket when Madame Boss was around.

"You're not handcuffed," Sylvia noted. "They didn't station a guard in here. They don't see you as a threat. You betrayed my son, didn't you?" No one answered her. "That's going to cost you if you're caught." She paused. "Well, not you, of course." She nodded at Jessie. "The boy and the Pokémon will be punished though."

"Why not me?" Jessie instantly demanded. She didn't want to be punished, but she didn't like this at all. The Boss had lost his mind in recent months (to her, at least) and she couldn't imagine what he'd do to them if he found them. "Is this some sexist thing?"

"With my son, perhaps, but that is not what I meant," the old woman noted. "Giovanni has always taken family so seriously. Like there was divinity running through our veins. I suppose I never helped with tales of how we had heroes and kings in our family lineage. He's so old fashioned in that sense, where blood matters most. My foolish boy has always been greedy and though vastly intelligent, he is still quite blind. He made mistakes in his quest to secure our bloodline, and that was why I sent her away."

"Who?" Meowth asked.

Eyes still locked on Jessie, Madame Rocket said, "Your mother. It was why I ordered one of her team members to kill her while she was searching for Mew. My son was getting soft and sentimental. So after he knocked up Miya Knox, and you were born, I knew he wouldn't have the right priorities. He'd either be distracted or slaughter you both. I'm not sure which, but I didn't want either. Not for you."

"What are you—" Jessie started, though she knew where this was going.

"You don't seem particularly bright either, yet you were in Team Rocket until you betrayed them. You were able to style your own outfits. I bet you screwed up time and time again. Those two boys – Sketchit and Slate – said two Rockets always did. Yet, he never got rid of you. Why?"

"I—"

The old woman interrupted again. "You're his daughter. My granddaughter."

James and Meowth both gaped at her, and Jessie's face turned red. "Tauros-shit."

"So crude," Sylvia tutted. "I do not lie. And you know, for family's sake, I'll give you a hint, so you won't go out there empty handed. My son probably put a bug on one of you. He's probably listening right now."

...

"So Squishy is safe and happy?" Bonnie asked Ash, her big blue eyes shining with relief at his nod. She sighed and leaned onto him. "I'm so glad! I was so worried!"

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Bonnie," the teenager said to her, setting his hand on the top of her head

as he hugged her to his side in a comforting embrace. "Not only did Diantha tell me to keep it quiet, but I didn't know what to say."

"You were used to keeping secrets by then," she figured, and he winced. Children were always so insightful that way.

Misty, who was sitting on Ash's other side, could attest to that. She was answering as many questions as she could about the orbs as Max stared at them with fascination. Bonnie had commandeered Ash's attention, so that left it to her to explain what they were, and the young boy was fascinated.

Everyone was sitting together in a room that felt warm and lively for the most part. Gary and Leaf were two exceptions, sitting on the safe loveseat, but as far from one another as they could. Dawn was the only other one who was silent, choosing to curl up into the chair that she had claimed. She was just glad to get out of her hospital room.

It was Tracey who regretfully broke up the happy air. Someone had to at some point. "So what about the Water Orb?"

Everyone fell silent before Clemont said, "We figure that Manaphy probably has it."

May nodded in agreement. "Yeah. The problem is finding the temple. It could be anywhere in the sea." She seemed really put-off by this point, but no one could really blame her. Those that had been on their journey understood, and those that hadn't could at least sympathize with what they had gone through.

"You know, it's kind of appropriate that we have to find Manaphy in the end," Max noted, startling everyone. "What? He was the one most people said flooded Cerulean City. It was a Mirage Pokémon, yeah, but still."

"Maybe that's the key, thinking about how this all began," Brock pondered, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"We thought about that though," Misty pointed out. "Shamouti Island."

As his friends talked, Ash let his mind wander before saying, "I need you to find these for me and bring them back to the beginning."

"What?" Cilan asked him curiously.

"That's what Arceus said to me, when he came to my dream. I asked him what he meant, but he said I'd know when it was time."

"Back to the beginning," Brock muttered. Everyone was silent in thought before he suddenly burst out laughing, startling every person in that room.

"Are you okay?" Serena asked him warily. She didn't know Brock very well, so she wasn't sure what to make of this.

"Back to the beginning," he said again once he got his laughter under control. "That doesn't mean Shamouti Island. The literal beginning. You saw it yourself Ash when Arceus showed you. The Tree of Beginning. We have to go to the Tree of Beginning."

Ash sat up straight, his eyes wide as he gaped. It made so much sense that he didn't know why it never occurred to him. The Tree of Beginning was literally the first piece of land Arceus had ever

created.

"Of course that's what it means," Misty groaned, smacking her forehead. "But we still need the water orb."

Brock was about to say something else when Jessie, James, and Meowth flew through the door. Everyone jumped and stared at them tensely before all three started babbling at the same time.

"Shut up! Both of ya!" Meowth hollered over the others and scratched their faces before turning to the rest of the group. "Ya gotta check yourselves. We got word that someone might have a bug on them and da boss had you two for a while."

Feeling his stomach drop, Ash tugged off his jacket, and let Misty start patting that down as he checked his shirt, hat, pants, and even his boots. Luckily, he couldn't find anything. Maybe someone else had thought about this before now? It seemed like something that a top secret organization would look for right away.

May and Dawn's identical gasps drew his attention towards them. May was helping Dawn check her clothes, her hand resting on the girl's hat as they stared at one another with wide eyes. With shaking hands, May carefully reached up into where Dawn's hat folded over, and pulled out a little electric device. She dropped it in shock.

"Oh my Mew," Dawn muttered in horror. "Oh no. Oh no. I'm sorry! I didn't—I'm sorry!"

"Get your Pokémon," James told them sternly. "Get ready to leave. He probably heard everything you've been saying. He probably knows exactly where we are. He'll come for us all."

Dawn looked like she was about to cry, but didn't resist as she allowed her friends to guide her through the halls to the mini Pokémon center that was built in there – it even included a Nurse Joy.

"I'm sorry," she muttered again, shoulders slumping as she carefully grabbed her Pokéballs.

"Don't worry," Ash assured her, resting a hand on her shoulder and squeezing gently. "It'll be a while before—" The lights flickered, and he froze.

"They do that sometimes," Tracey assured him.

Ash wasn't listening to that. His eyes were focused on the ceiling. A sinking thought hit him. What if Giovanni had followed them days ago? What if he was waiting for one last bit of information? The information they had just provided.

"Ash?" Someone was talking to him, or maybe all of his friends were. He wasn't paying attention to them though. His entire body tensed up. He was vaguely aware of Pikachu jumping up on his shoulder, fur standing on end.

Ash bolted from the room with nothing but his bag full of orbs and his Pokéballs. He ran as fast as he could, not caring that people were yelling at him to stop. He didn't even care that he used his Aura to shove two big men in black suits away from him, making his way out the door.

He spun around, eyes focused over Blackthorn City, and felt like he was about to throw up.

"Ash, what..." Misty trailed off as the power went out.

There was a bright flash of orange light, and then something started to take shape. Something that was so very wrong that it made Ash want to physically recoil. He had felt the power of Mirage

Legendary Pokémon before, but it was nothing like this.

"Oh no," Gary muttered. "Oh no."

Ash felt like his heart dropped to his stomach and then his stomach dropped out of his body entirely. He felt almost numb. He shivered violently as the creature let out a haunting sound that was just pure wrong.

"He made a fucking Arceus," Leaf gaped.

"Get out of here!" They all jumped as Lance ran out to them. "Right now. Go do what you have to do."

"They heard us though. The bug. It was in Dawn's hat," Brock informed him. "They know where we're going."

"The Tree of Beginning," Tracey clarified. "It's where we have to go."

"Then go. Take the orbs. Get out of here before—" Lance was cut off as the sky lit up with a blinding, golden light that split into several balls of light that slammed into the city. The shockwaves sent them all to the ground.

"Let's go," James urged, and somehow, his voice was able to prompt everyone into moving. Ash wanted to stay and fight, but he knew they didn't stand a chance.

"This way," Jessie told them, leading the fourteen of them away from the explosions as more and more rocked the ground. Bonnie screamed as she nearly tripped, but Serena grabbed her and pulled her forward; May doing the same with Max.

"Go that way! Through the mountains and forests," James told them as they neared the area. "Keep going that way and you'll get to the Kanto border. Don't stop."

Ash turned to watch in horror as the Mirage Arceus completely destroyed Blackthorn City effortlessly.

"Go!"

They had no choice. There was nothing they could do here. Nothing they could do for their families right now. So Ash, Misty, Brock, Tracey, Gary, Leaf, May, Max, Dawn, Iris, Cilan, Serena, Clemont, and Bonnie all moved closer together so that they wouldn't get separated, and then they ran.

Jessie, James, and Meowth watched them go before turning to watch the wreckage as Arceus approached where the Dragon's Den was.

"This is what he planned on doing all along, isn't it?" James asked in a breath.

Knowing that the man in question was her biological father made Jessie wince, but she nodded her head and said, "I guess...this is how the world ends."

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Still I Rise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



One step in front of the other. Don't stop. Go fast. Don't dawdle. Keep breathing. Don't look back.

That was Brock's mantra as they ran through the twisting mountain paths, getting further and further away from Blackthorn City, or what was once Blackthorn City. It might not even exist anymore. That thought made the young man want to throw up. All of his brothers and sisters were still there. He knew that there were many escape routes out of the League's secret base, and that they would have started evacuating the civilians first, but he was still alarmed at the fact that he hadn't really thought about them when he ran.

It was instinct. Grab the people he was with and run. It was just like when he was traveling with Ash and their other friends and came face to face with legendary Pokémon. Brock was ashamed of himself, if he was honest. Going back wouldn't help anyone now.

"We need to stop," Leaf gasped out suddenly. "Ash! Stop!"

The black-haired boy came to a stop so suddenly that Gary almost slammed into him, just managing to swerve around him.

Gary stumbled slightly, but caught his footing again, turning to stare at Leaf with a rather cross expression. "We need to get away from the raging Mirage Arceus."

"We are away," Leaf snapped at him before pointing over her shoulder. Bonnie and Max were both panting with exhaustion, and some of the others seemed almost as bad. "We're okay. It can't get us out here. We need a break. Besides, I didn't ask you." Her eyes turned back to Ash. "Just for a few minutes."

"You're right," Ash said with a sigh, feeling the adrenaline fading away some. If he could feel the burning in his legs, he was sure that some of the others were worse off. He felt Pikachu pat his head, and look at his partner encouragingly.

Everyone slumped to the ground, all out of breath from their run. Looking back at the twisting rocks, hills, and steep cliffs, it was actually amazing that nobody had fallen off yet.

"What do we have with us?" Brock asked once he caught his wind again.

"Nothing, we don't even have any water. Just our Pokémon and the orbs," Tracey pointed out.

"We could use the Pokémon for water," Misty reasoned, tapping her finger on her leg. "It's not gross like some other people think it is. The only problem is that we don't have any bottles or cups so they'd have to keep a stream going and we'd basically have to shove our faces into it. It might make for a weaker Pokémon, and I'm not sure we want that, especially now."

They all thought about that for a moment, no one able to come up with a better idea. Before anyone could take a Pokéball out, May suddenly asked, "Do you think we should have stayed?" Everyone stared at her.

"No," Clemont decided after a moment. "We might have died. We probably wouldn't have, but it was a chance. Being there wouldn't stop this. Finding the Water Orb will."

"We have to assume Giovanni heard us," Cilan noted, his eyes flickering to the blue-haired girl, who looked down at her hands, covered by bandages and Leaf's gloves. "It wasn't your fault, Dawn. We had days to find that bug while you were asleep. We even cleaned your hat. It just stayed in there. It's on everyone."

She took a deep breath. "If he did hear, he'll be waiting at this tree, won't he?"

"Probably. From what you told us about how you escaped, I don't think he's going to let either you or Ash slip away from him again. Not if he can help it," Brock told her, and her shoulders slumped a bit.

"So we go in fighting!" Bonnie said, pumping her fists in the air. Dedenne popped out of the bag that she had with her, which only held the little Pokémon and a tiny first aid kit, and mimicked her motion.

"We?" Clemont repeated, raising an eyebrow at his sister.

Bonnie rolled her eyes and folded her arms. "What are you gonna do? Leave me on the side of the road somewhere? Or in the middle of a forest?"

Serena snorted at her words, and Clemont just stared at his younger sister, knowing she was right.

"Okay, I really hate to be the downer here," Max said, glaring at May when she muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'no you don't. "We have the orb to find like he said, so shouldn't we focus on that?" He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and pointed towards the north. "There's a river not too far from here. It goes into Kanto. We could start there."

"At least it's water," Iris agreed, crossing her arms. "We're not going to find it around here."

"How far is it?" Ash asked Max.

"Not too far. We could probably get there in an hour, walking," the young boy answered.

"Okay. Let's go there. We'll get some water and rest, instead of bringing out one of the Pokémon. How does that sound?"

Everyone agreed with the plan and stood up again, stretching their limbs and getting ready to walk at a much slower pace than before. They were in a hurry, but no one wanted to tire themselves out by running just yet

...

Red was leaning on a crutch when Delia found him, but he somehow seemed to be holding himself up straight and proud – like he wasn't held prisoner for months. He was staring blankly over the damage caused by Mirage Arceus.

Beyond him, Lance was standing silently beside Clair, who was kneeling on the ground, her fist digging into the earth beneath her.

"That thing is too powerful," Amanda Green muttered as she came up behind Delia. "Yellow, that has to be the real one."

"We saw it appear," Delia pointed out in an almost off-handed way. It didn't really matter to her at that moment. There were more important things.

She walked over to where Red was standing and said, "What happened to Ash? Where is my son?"

"Our son—"

"My son," she interrupted, an angry tone to her voice. Outside of his biological contribution, he had done nothing to raise Ash and really had no right to act like he had some sort of say in the boy's life.

Red paused only briefly before continuing, "Our son is safe. He got away with his friends. They helped." He pointed to his side, not even bothering to look at Delia.

The woman fumed, but looked at where he had pointed. She saw the two from Team Rocket, along with their Pokémon, staring at the damage in horror. Shooting a dirty look at Red, she moved towards them instead.

Green watched Delia storm away before looking at her old friend. "Red..."

"We don't stand a chance against this thing," he blurted out, waving his arm before him.

Green's shoulder slumped a bit and her teeth sunk into her lip. "Blue might have known what to do." She didn't know what possessed her to say that, but it just wouldn't stay in.

"Blue's dead because we couldn't end this right the first time," Red snapped. "The only chance we have is killing him and anyone that tries to stop him. We can't take any more prisoners."

Green stared at him with a bit of surprise but then looked down. She should have seen this coming. There really was no other way to win anymore. They'd have to sink to the same level as Team Rocket and fight fire with fire.

While Red and Green were talking, Delia came to a stop beside Team Rocket, who seemed surprised to see her. There was no way they didn't know who she was, and she could see the familiarity in their eyes.

"Thank you." Her words seemed to startle them. "You helped save my son."

"We're sorry, ma'am," James spoke up, looking down at the red R on his chest sadly. "About everything that we've done, that they've done. We heard that they call you Yellow sometimes. We heard that name before."

"It's alright," Delia decided after a moment. "There are good people pulled into these organizations

and that's always been the biggest problem. If we didn't let that happen there would be no power in these type of Teams." She closed her eyes and stared at them seriously. "Is there anything that you can tell us that might help?"

"They were testing the Mirage Pokémon," Jessie explained. "That's one of the reasons why the Bo—Giovanni..." She trailed off as her mind added in the words 'her father.' "It was one of the reasons why he was willing to hand control over them to other Team Leaders. It gave him a test, and a look into the other regions."

"That's why Mirage Kyogre and Groudon attacked the real ones. To see if they could win and control the same powers," James added. He didn't have to point out that the two fake Pokémon weren't able to control the weather. It was entirely out of balance and they were fortunate that the Legendary Birds around Shamouti Island weren't acting up on top of everything.

"There's something else too," Meowth piped out, realizing that Lance and Red were now paying attention to them. "They've been developing weapons that can kill Pokémon. Been testing those too." Luckily they weren't forced to test those before they left.

"Giovanni," Jessie spat out the name, "wants to replace the real Arceus with his fake one that he can control. The real one might not stand a chance." She thought for a moment. "But when we last saw Yung, he was going on about some additional changes."

"He was a perfectionist," James explained. "But he's dead now. It might not be completely finished."

"If it's vulnerable in some way..." Green breathed out.

"Red." Lance looked over at the Master. "What do you want to do?"

Before Red could answer, Delia said, "We have faith in Ash. Arceus asked him to help, so he knew this was coming. They're looking for a way to fight that thing. I know it."

Red regarded her skeptically, as if he was unable to believe that a bunch of kids could stop this, despite what he had seen so far. He looked out over the destroyed city. "The Tree of Beginning. Lance, you said Dawn found a bug in her hat. We need to assume Giovanni will know where they're going. He'll know by now that they're trying to stop him. I want most of the men to head that way. Leave a few here to look for survivors and get the civilians from the base to help. The rest of us are heading out as soon as possible."

His voice left no room for argument, though Delia certainly had some. She knew she wasn't going to go, she wouldn't be much help even with Mimey and was much better off here, but that didn't make her happy.

Red might not believe in Ash and his friends, but she did, and she knew they could win. They just might need a little bit of help.

...

The sound of rushing water caught Pikachu's attention, and his ears twitched a bit. He glanced over his shoulder at Dedenne, who seemed to perk up a bit, recognizing the sound too. Twisting back to his trainer, Pikachu tapped his shoulder and pointed. "Pika cha Pikapi."

"That way?" Ash repeated, before nodding his head. "This way guys. Pikachu hears the water that way."

Pikachu felt a warmth rush through him and he nuzzled his cheek against Ash's head. His trainer trusted him without any bit of wariness, except for the times he deemed Pikachu was throwing himself into harm's way for nothing. It wasn't nothing, it was his Pikapi. The stupid boy who dragged him around on a cloth's line and got them in trouble with a flock of Spearow. The stupid boy who was his very best friend in the world.

The little Pokémon only wished that he had been able to do more. He had been in that stupid Pokéball far too many times as of recent. Just the thought made him glance down at where he knew it was warily. He hated that little thing and how it made him think of being trapped and unwanted. The other Pokémon thought he was a bit ridiculous (and spoiled), but they just didn't understand.

Sometimes he could see the benefits of it though. In general, everyone else healed a lot quicker than he did, and he had a little more wear and tear to him. Pikachu wouldn't have it any other way.

He couldn't wait until the air stopped smelling wrong again. He was sure his Pikapi could do it, and he was going to be with him every step of the way, even if it meant going into that vile ball.

Pikachu knew that Ash's other Pokémon would agree with him, even the ones that were there. He wished that they could come out of their Pokéballs more often but understood why they didn't. It was too dangerous with too few Pokémon Centers and resources in between.

Of course, Pikachu knew that all of the Pokémon would point the same things out to their human companions, but it wasn't like they could put them into Pokéballs. Though if they could, Pikachu was sure he would have taken Ash and ran to hide somewhere far, far away.

Ash let out a quiet sigh of relief that only Pikachu felt when they got to the edge of the water. He was doing that thing where he was trying to push his own fears and worries to the side to take care of everyone else. That had ended up being a horrible idea that seemed to almost cripple him when it became too much after Sinnoh.

Honestly, when this was all over, Pikachu was going to have to sit down and have a long talk with his partner about taking care of himself. He might even give Ash a small shock to make his point clear.

The grass beside the river was soft and cool to the touch, though the leaves themselves were starting to change colour. It was autumn now, so the air was becoming more chilled. It was unfortunate that they'd have to spend the night outside, since most of the kids were wearing more summer-based clothing.

Ash knelt down beside the water, and Pikachu jumped off of him to get a drink. Everything was so clean and clear there, it was like none of the horrible things happening were real. Pikachu almost just wanted to stay there. Surely they could find some food, stock up a cave, and live there for winter?

Pikachu looked up as Ash moved away from the lake and sat down. The Pokémon observed him for a second before frowning. Yes, he was definitely doing that thing where he was blaming himself for not being able to help when he wouldn't have been able to do anything.

They really were going to have to sit down and have a long conversation after all of this.

Pikachu climbed up on Ash's lap. The trainer didn't even bother opening his eyes, he just tugged the Pokémon close and started stroking his fur. Pikachu felt warmth rush over him as he snuggled closer, barely paying attention when everyone agreed to spend the night there. They really had

nowhere else to go right now, aside from following the river the next day.

Yes, Pikachu decided, this was where he belonged.

...

Having found the river and the water supply, the group drank their fill and then drifted off to sleep to get a bit of rest. It was strangely calm in the forest, with only a gentle breeze, and was so far removed from the destruction that they had seen that it was almost like a bad nightmare and not reality.

Still, most of them were a bit restless.

There were two flashes of light, and two feline Pokémon hovered above them. Dedenne and Pikachu's ears both twitched, and the two Pokémon started to wake up. Ash shifted, eyes slowly opening.

Mew met his eyes, before her entire body was surrounded by a pink glow. Ash instantly fell back asleep, along with the two Pokémon. Everyone else who was restless was suddenly peaceful.

"Their journey has been perilous," Mewtwo said in his deep voice. "Yet, the hardest part is still coming. Why is Arceus so against us helping?"

"You know why," Mew answered in her sweet, childish tone. "We're helping them now, aren't we?" Mewtwo scoffed at this statement, but Mew wasn't surprised. He had been very much against Arceus' actions and decisions, believing that they should have helped and fought. That was why Arceus sent him to protect the Pokémon in the Distortion World.

Both Pokémon concentrated, and light surrounded them, the humans, and the Pokémon. A second later, they were all gone from the river side. Almost immediately, they appeared in a thicket of trees where they would be safe.

"Should we wake them?" Mewtwo asked.

"No, let them sleep. They'll be safe here," Mew assured him. "This is going to end soon one way or another. Let them rest."

"It could have ended sooner. You could have removed the orbs as well. You are the first Chosen One."

"Yes," Mew admitted. "But that wasn't my destiny. Father made it clear. It wasn't my journey. It was his." She paused, and placed a gentle paw on Ash's head. "Good luck." She straightened up and flew around Mewtwo. "Come now, we need to go." Then she vanished as if she had never been there.

Mewtwo hovered for a moment longer, looking at each person and Pokémon in turn until his eyes landed on Ash, the first person that had showed him kindness. The boy that hadn't even heard the words 'Chosen One' by that point, not that Mewtwo himself had. He was just a simple boy with a heart filled with kindness.

Mewtwo would never forgive himself for not helping more. "Forgive me."

Then he was gone.

...

Cilan was the first to wake up, squinting a bit at the cloudy sky above them. He blinked several times, focusing on the trees for a moment before closing his eyes again and rolling over, inhaling deeply.

With his eyes still closed, a frown crossed his face. Something was different. Their camp beside the river had a peaceful taste of untouched wilderness to it. Now it smelled like mildew and something else unpleasant, with a touch of salt.

Peeling his eyes open again, Cilan looked around and realized that there was no river. They were in a completely different place.

"Ah!" He yelped, jumping up and accidentally kicking Iris in the process.

Her eyes were barely open when she swung around, hand colliding with Cilan's face. He yelped again, this time in pain as his hands shot up to cup his nose and his eyes started watering.

"I'm sorry!" Iris squeaked when she realized what she had done, scrambling to her knees and putting a hand on his shoulder. "Let me look at it! Did I break it?"

"It's okay, it's okay," he repeated, his voice sounding like he had a cold.

The commotion made everyone else wake up rather quickly, most of them focusing on Iris and Cilan, wondering what was going on.

Ash blinked several times as he looked around. He raised his hand in the air. "Guys? Where are we?"

"That's what I freaked out over," Cilan admitted, lowering his hands from his nose. It wasn't bleeding, and he doubted it was broken, but it stung something bad.

"Pikachu, Dedenne, did you guys see anything?" Bonnie asked the two Pokémon, who glanced at one another and shook their heads. Neither one of them had a clue how fourteen people and two Pokémon moved to a completely different place while they were asleep.

"Wait a second," Ash said, pinching the bridge of his nose as he thought. His head snapped up. "Mew. I saw Mew for a second. I think Mewtwo was there too. Then I don't...I think I saw them. Maybe it was a dream."

"That makes some kind of sense," Dawn admitted. Her eyes were on her hands as she carefully moved her fingers, as if testing that they still worked.

"If Mirage Arceus is already out there, it does make sense," Leaf agreed grimly.

Misty stood up and stretched out her sore limbs. She didn't say anything as the others began to discuss and theorize what could have happen, she was too focused on the fact that one of her legs was asleep. She hated the pins and needles feeling, and walked around to get it to go away.

While she was walking, she was looking beyond the trees that were around them, and quickly realized that she could see some sort of buildings in the distance. Misty took a few steps forward, looking around some of the trees to get a better glance at what it was.

Her hand clenched the tree beside her, turning her knuckles pure white, and her eyes went wide.

"Misty?" Tracey asked, having seen her suddenly freeze. "What's wrong?" He walked over to her side to see what she was looking at, and his breath left him, horror running through his body.

Ash stopped talking to the rest of the group and looked around towards them. He could feel the distress rolling off of them in waves without even looking at them, and he didn't like it at all. Jumping to his feet, he approached them, a question on his lips that died as soon as he saw what they saw. He took a couple steps back and looked at the rest of the group. "We're...I know where we are."

"Well, don't leave us hanging," Gary said, leaning against a tree and crossing his arms. "Where did the legends deliver us now?"

Ash nodded towards the edge of the trees. He grabbed his bag and held his arm out for Pikachu to jump off before walking back to where Tracey and Misty were standing.

One by one, everyone else joined them, and what they were looking at became slowly apparent to every single one of them.

"This is..." Serena trailed off, unable to say the words.

"Cerulean City," Tracey finished, his voice shaking slightly. "We were brought to Cerulean City."

...

Cerulean City had been a rather small, quaint city at one point of time, with just enough buildings and people to keep things interesting. Over the years, it had boomed into a hub of shopping, date spots, and so much more. In recent years, it was even starting to be a prime place to shoot movies, and people started whispering that it was becoming Kanto's version of PokéStar Studios.

Misty had loved her home city, though it was never quite as homey as Pallet Town was. She didn't know everyone, even if everyone knew her due to the fact that she was the Gym Leader. It wasn't a love that she always had. In fact, when she was younger, she despised the city and everything it represented. It was a reminder to her that she wasn't like her sisters, that she was the runt and nothing special. Going back to the city had been hard, let alone going to the Gym itself, but in the long run Misty was glad that she did. As she grew and learned, she learned to appreciate her home, appreciate her sisters. It was true, from time to time, she felt stuck or trapped there, but it never persisted enough for her to grow to resent the city or her Gym.

She had come to love everything from the looming buildings with their reflective windows, to the quaint little shops that still persisted even as the city changed.

That alone was enough of a reason for the teenage girl to feel a sharp stab of pain in her heart when she saw the state of the city from a distance. The smaller, old buildings were completely destroyed, and while most of the taller buildings still stood, there were a couple that hadn't been structurally sound enough to stand up against a tsunami. Not that there had ever been a reason for them to think about a tsunami hitting them before.

Misty looked up as they passed by the familiar buildings, eyeing the way the top and bottom of the buildings were coloured differently, no doubt from water damage. The windows were completely destroyed, and in some cases there were metal frames twisting dangerously.

The debris had been pushed out of the way at some point, probably by Team Rocket to make traversing the city easier. Despite that, there were still piles of litter, metal, shattered glass, and so much more on the sides of the road.

Luckily they hadn't come across any bodies.

To Tracey, that was actually slightly unsettling. He was a dreamer, that was true, but he could be

very practical when he wanted to be, and his practical side was telling him that there was no way the street they were on hadn't been littered with bodies before.

In his mind's eye, he saw a flash of blonde hair and green eyes, and his stomach twisted uncomfortably. Tracey was more than grateful that they weren't heading in the direction of the gym. Just because there weren't any bodies outside, didn't mean that those who perished inside were removed. He didn't want to see her as a rotten corpse.

Even worse than the sights had to be the smell. A combination of mildew, rot, and things that they'd rather not think about.

May hugged herself as she stared at a house that had been completely crushed by the rushing water. She knew that the family that had lived there probably perished, and didn't want to think too much on that.

The young teenager knew that it wasn't her Manaphy that had destroyed Cerulean City, but so many people did think that, and it made her sick to think about on top of everything else. She had even thought it was Manaphy at one point because what else could it have been?

The breeze brushed her bangs into her eyes, causing her to blink and let a couple tears fall. She wiped them away quickly and looked away from the others, not wanting them to see her cry. What she felt was a tiny fraction compared to what Misty must have been going through. Tracey too, considering Daisy had been there. When she looked away, the first thing she saw was a large body of water in the distance that definitely hadn't been there before.

May felt her stomach twist as she muttered, "The ocean."

That made Gary stop and look over in the same direction. He frowned, looking rather disturbed by that revelation. "The coastline...it wasn't exactly super close to Cerulean before." He didn't say it, but they could all hear what he was thinking. There had to be thousands of Pokémon that perished in the attack.

Misty took a step forward, and froze when her foot landed on something soft. She inhaled sharply, trying to keep her nausea at bay, not wanting to know what it was and picturing the absolute worst scenario.

Slowly, she glanced down, and her heart dropped. She took a step back and leaned down, picking up the doll at her feet. It was clearly a home-made one that belonged to a young girl at one point. The hair was made with thick strands of wool that were torn and matted, the body made of soft plush, and the little dress had been decorated as a Goldeen. Over all, it looked like it managed to survive the disasters pretty well.

Except for the fact that there was a large splotch of red dyed on it, and Misty knew exactly what that was.

Her hands shook as she slowly held the doll close to her, closing her eyes and gritting her teeth. She refused to cry. Misty didn't want anyone to see her and start trying to comfort her. She didn't want anyone to touch her or talk to her. She just wanted to be as alone as she could be, though Misty also knew that she had to stay with the group for safety's sake.

Brock had warned them of the distinct possibility that there were survivors hiding in the city, and they might not exactly be friendly. Separating for that reason alone would be a bad idea.

Out of the corner of her eye, Misty saw Serena starting to approach. As much as she grew to care

about the blonde, she honestly didn't want to deal with her right now. She turned to say something that Misty prayed wouldn't come out in too much of a nasty way, when Ash placed a hand on Serena's shoulder. He shook his head and mouthed something that looked suspiciously like 'leave her.'

Serena hesitated, glancing back at her, before nodding and walking back over to where Bonnie was. Misty felt relief rush through her as Ash glanced at her, meeting her eyes without hesitation. He didn't walk over to her. He didn't offer to talk or comfort her. He just sent her a very small smile and nodded his head before turning away.

Misty felt warmth rush through her. He couldn't get specific enough with his Aura to know exactly what she wanted, though he could get impressions from her emotions. He had to feel the emotional rollercoaster she was riding. Yet, he knew her well enough to know what he needed to do, and she really appreciated that. Of course, Brock and Tracey didn't approach her either, because they knew just as much as him. They had been her friends for a long time, so they just knew.

The silence of the city was another thing that weighed down on her, so as they got closer to where the new coastline was, Misty did appreciate the sound of the waves. Her stomach twisted again at the thought, but she tried to shove that aside again. The ocean shouldn't be there, yet there it was. There was no more Cerulean Cape and surrounding landmass, just kilometers of water.

The silence was so prominent, that they could hear the sound of engines in the distance very easily.

"We should go into the tree line," Iris suggested, twisting her hands nervously. They were standing in the middle of a wide open space and would be easily seen by someone even if they were farther away.

"Right, this way," Leaf decided when no one else spoke up, leading them towards the trees. She glanced over her shoulder when she noticed that neither Ash nor Misty were following them. The girl was staring out at the ocean, clutching the doll to her chest, while Ash stared at her.

He must have felt Leaf's eyes on him, because Ash turned around and muttered, "I'll find you in a few minutes. Go." She decided it was best to not question him, and led the rest of the group into the trees.

Misty stared at the water, holding the doll close to her. She heard Ash coming up behind her, but he said nothing. She wouldn't know what to say if he tried to talk to her.

Slowly, Misty walked forward until she was at the edge of the water, and knelt down. With her bare hands, she started digging at the soggy earth, not caring if the soil got under her short fingernails. Once she decided that the hole was deep enough, she put the doll inside, and covered it over.

She didn't pray. Misty never had. When she was younger, she thought that Arceus was cruel for taking her parents. When she was older, she thought he was a myth. When she realized the legendary Pokémon were real, she went back to him being cruel. Then she found out that he had left them a long time ago. Unlike some who worshipped other legendary Pokémon, she never had. She never saw the point.

Despite this, she sent her thoughts out into the world that wherever everyone was, they were safe and happy. If there was something after they died, at least her sisters would be with their parents, grandparents, aunt and so many others.

Breath caught in Misty's throat as it hit her, and really, truly hit her, for the first time. She was

completely alone now. Her family was entirely gone.

She lurched forward, breathing in and out rapidly and holding her hand to her chest as she shook. Her heart was racing wildly, and beads of sweat started dotting her forehead.

"Misty? It's Ash. Look at me, Mist." Misty hadn't realized that she closed her eyes at some point, yet she must have because she was very slowly opening them to the gentle coaxing. She felt a hand under her chin, just barely applying pressure, and let her head be tilted up. She felt the hand fall away as she met Ash's eyes briefly. It seemed to be enough for him though.

He smiled at her. "Good. You need to breathe, okay? Slow and steady like me." He started modeling deep breaths, holding it for a moment, and releasing it. "You can do it; I know you can. Breathe in for a few seconds, hold it, and then breathe out slowly. You got this."

It took a few moments, but Misty started to mimic his breathing. She blinked and saw his hand outstretched to her. Slowly, she took it, squeezing his hand in her hand. Ash let his thumb stroke the back of her hand, but he did nothing else. "I'm here. I promise you. I'm here. Everyone else is just beyond the trees. We're all here."

Misty took a few more deep breaths and her eyes finally met his and stayed. He was obviously worried, but there was absolutely no judgment about her behavior. Her breath caught in her throat, but it felt different this time.

Instead of forgetting how to breathe, she practically threw herself at Ash, burying her face in his shirt as she sobbed, her fingers grasping the fabric tightly. Ash hugged her, resting his head on top of hers, and rubbing her back.

"Mist, we need to move," Ash said, sounding so reluctant to break the silence. "Whoever is in the city is really close. I can feel their Auras and they don't feel friendly."

Misty nodded her head, and clung to him as he stood up. She had a headache, and felt completely miserable, so she gladly slipped under Ash's arm as he held it up, moving close to his side as they started to walk, his arm over her shoulders.

"Thank you," she choked out.

"You're welcome." He briefly tilted his head, resting his cheek on top of her orange hair before straightening up and leading the way towards their friends.

...

"We should get away from Cerulean City," Brock said, rubbing the corners of his eyes to relieve the stress. "What good is being here?"

"The ocean," Clemont said, flushing a bit when everyone looked at him. "I'm just saying what we're all thinking. The orb is going to be here. That's why we were brought here. This is where Giovanni made his first really big move. Before that, it was kidnapping trainers quietly. Cerulean was when things really started to go bad overall. There's a new coast line. There's also the irony that this city used to be where the water gym of all types was. You know I'm right."

"You almost always are," Leaf agreed with him. She shifted uncomfortably on the spot before asking, "Okay, I know this is going to sound horrible, but I think some of us need to go into the city and..." She trailed off, looking almost sick with herself for what she was about to suggest.

"See if there's any water and food," Cilan finished with a nod of his head. "We need something, or

we're going to be useless against Giovanni."

Bonnie gripped Dedenne to her a little more tightly than she meant to. "So you might have to steal?"

"Unfortunately, we will have to," Serena told the young girl, resting a hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, you're going to stay here. No stealing for you." Her eyes flickered over to Max. "Or you." It wasn't her place, but she couldn't help it. Serena felt the urge to keep every single person there completely safe, especially the youngest ones.

Max blinked at her, surprised, but just shrugged, causing Pikachu to shift on his shoulder. The Pokémon had chosen to stay with them rather than Ash when he went to talk to Misty. Max frowned at that thought. "Do you think Misty's okay?"

"No," Tracey answered without hesitation, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Nothing about this is okay, not right now. That's alright though, we're all allowed to feel that way."

"You're right," Max agreed, brown eyes looking at the grass sadly. He had forgotten that Tracey had lost someone important to him there too. He then looked up to his sister, who had lost Drew too. The thought made Max scared, though he wouldn't admit it.

It was easier to pretend nothing was wrong in the safety of the G-Men's base.

"It's getting late," Brock noted, sounding almost surprised. Then again, they had woken up late thanks to their forced sleep, and they had spent quite a while wandering through Cerulean City. They could have probably moved somewhere else, but he eventually agreed that being by the ocean was probably the best bet, so staying put made sense. "Let's get some food, water, and we'll stay here. We're out of sight, so no one should sneak up on us, but we'll take shifts staying awake."

It seemed like the best idea they had, so they started splitting into groups. Eventually, it was decided that Brock, Gary and Leaf knew Cerulean City best out of everyone there. Tracey knew it better, but no one wanted to force him to go back there. Eventually, Brock, Iris, Gary, May, Leaf, and Serena left to go and get some more supplies. This left Dawn, Bonnie, Max, Tracey, Clemont, and Cilan behind.

Their little campsite was quiet, so when Ash and Misty approached, everyone could hear them coming before they got there.

Cilan sighed in relief when he saw who it was, his fingers moving away from his Pokéballs. He was about to talk to them, but decided that it probably wasn't a good idea. Misty was clearly trying to shy behind Ash a bit, probably not wanting them to see her cry again.

Instead of talking to them, Ash just guided her over to a tree where they both slumped down on it. Almost immediately, she pulled her legs up to her chest and leaned on him so that her face was against his shoulder.

Ash looked at her sadly before looking around. "Where's everyone else?"

"Went to get water and food," Dawn answered him, inching a little bit closer. She frowned and tilted her head slightly.

Cilan almost sighed from disbelief because Ash and Dawn's expressions of sadness and worry were just so similar that it was almost painful to look at. He should have seen it, and frowned upon his ability as a connoisseur. Not that siblings, or half-siblings, have the same feel to them, but he felt like he should have known.

"How's she doing?" Dawn asked in a quiet whisper.

Ash glanced down at Misty, who appeared to be asleep. He turned his attention back to the blue-haired girl, and said, "Not good." His eyes flickered to her hands. "You okay?"

"I took the heavy bandages off," she admitted, flexing his fingers slightly. "There's lighter ones with medication on them. Iris helped me."

He nodded his head and leaned back onto Misty a little more. It was clear that though he genuinely was worried about Dawn, his thoughts were elsewhere. The young girl didn't take offence to this at all.

Pikachu watched the entire scene, his eyes following Dawn as she walked back over to where Bonnie was sitting, talking quietly to Dedenne. The tiny girl smiled warmly and the two began talking in quiet voices.

The electric-type Pokémon managed to slip away from next, scampering over to his trainer. He eyed Ash and Misty for a moment. "Pikapi?"

Ash held out the arm that hadn't been commandeered by Misty, and Pikachu was quick to rush over, nuzzling his face into Ash's shirt. He then snuggled his way towards Misty, so that she was holding onto him while Ash was holding onto her.

Cilan couldn't help but smile at the sight. It was nice to get a taste of something so sweet amongst the bitterness.

Though he knew it wasn't going to last for long.

...

Tracey yawned loudly. His eyes were burning from both tiredness and the fact that he had been trying to suppress tears all day, but while he managed to keep the tears away, finding any sleep proved to be impossible.

He had seen footage of the tsunami from above, and he had fully intended on coming to Cerulean City months ago to help with rescue and recovery, but seeing it now was something else all together.

His brown eyes flickered away from the small fire they dared make – the ocean air far too cold without it – to where Ash suddenly shifted, stretching out a little bit. A wave of resentment rushed through him, but a moment later, Tracey felt almost ashamed. It wasn't Ash's fault that Daisy was gone and Misty was still there.

Ash suddenly looked at him, and it took Tracey a moment to remember that his friend probably felt that shift in his emotions. He knew that Ash tried to ignore things like that for the most part out of respect for his friends. It was still a bit unnerving, but at least Ash couldn't hear thoughts.

The teenager opened and closed his mouth several times before asking, "How are you feeling?"

Tracey had to hand it to him. At least he didn't ask if he was okay. He shrugged slightly. "I'm trying not to think what she would have gone through, you know? What she saw in those last minutes. What she felt."

Ash closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. He didn't say anything, but he was paying attention.

"Daisy was so proud of herself," Tracey said, his voice both wistful and filled with pain. "She wanted to be a good Gym Leader. It wasn't just Misty whipping her into shape. Once Daisy realized that she could battle she was just so excited. It wasn't fair."

"It wasn't," Ash agreed sadly.

"If we win, if we somehow all survive this...I don't think I want to be involved with the Pokémon League anymore. Not even by being Professor Oak's assistant." Tracey took a deep breath as he said that. It had been on his mind for a while. "Don't get me wrong, I'd love to still stay in contact with him. Visit too. I just don't want to be a part of this world anymore. Not right now with Red, Lance and many others pulling everyone's strings."

"I get it." Ash nodded. He shrugged his shoulders at Tracey's curious sound. "What good is being the Pokémon Master? I don't want to be like Red. Completely alone. Maybe it's just best—"

"No!" Tracey interrupted sharply, surprising even himself. He felt a bit of desperation run through him that he couldn't explain, and it took him a moment of silent thought to figure out exactly what he wanted to say. Luckily for him, Ash seemed to have developed more patience, even though the younger male was visibly itching to understand Tracey's outburst. "When Red became the Champion and the Master, he pushed because it was a twisted system that he wanted to right. Now it's become something else but still broken and someone needs to fix it. It can't be Red. It can't be Lance."

"So what, me?" Ash raised an eyebrow.

"Someone," Tracey amended. "But why not you? Fix the problems with the rest of us helping you. Fix the problems so that we don't have to go through this again. So that this won't just be swept under the rug as a league victory. So that Daisy's memory might be used for something good." The young man frowned and straightened his shoulders. "More than anything, keep pushing for you. Who cares what Red did or says? You're not him. Be you and do what you do best. Show him that whatever he said to you is wrong."

He wasn't going to admit it, but Tracey felt a little bit embarrassed by his outburst, even if it was a quiet one.

Bless Ash for being one of the least judgmental people ever. If anything, the black-haired boy seemed a bit taken back, and there was definitely a bit of wariness in his eyes. It was saddening to see someone who was so naturally confident and upbeat seem so unsure, but who was Tracey to judge?

"Maybe," Ash compromised, clearly choosing his words carefully. He looked down at Misty. "You know, for someone who is so honest with such a nasty temper, she keeps a lot of the big things inside that she thinks will worry others. Maybe you guys should just...talk to each other. She would understand, right?" His eyes widened. "Not that Misty needs to be told what to do or—"

"Ash?" Tracey asked, watching his friend freeze and look over his shoulder.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu asked as he opened his eyes, having been curled up on Misty's lap.

Ash shifted, gently setting Misty on the ground. The girl groaned and shifted in her sleep, but she didn't wake up, dealing with the stress and pain in the exact opposite way Tracey did.

"I'll be back," Ash assured his older friend. He then looked at Pikachu and added, "Watch them? And the orbs." He waved towards his bag.

Pikachu hesitated before nodding his head. Ash smiled at him before getting to his feet and walking away quickly.

Tracey watched him go, feeling nervousness creeping up in him. He really hoped that nothing bad was going to happen, but he also doubted that.

...

Max felt something warm press against his cheek. It was a strange feeling, not like when his sister or mother would ever touch him. At the same time, it still felt familiar.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and yawned, staring at the ground before stretching out and twisting around. Almost immediately, he froze when he saw a white and gold blur floating above his head.

He scrambled for his glasses, dropping them once before he managed to slam them onto his face. The blurred figure came into sharp focus, and Max felt his breath catch in his throat. With shaking hands, he slowly reached up and whispered, "Jirachi?"

Jirachi smiled warmly at him, flying down into his arms. Max clung to the tiny Pokémon, unable to believe what he was actually seeing. "How? You were supposed to be asleep."

"Arceus woke me up to help," the Pokémon whispered. "I heard you before, and I heard you now." Jirachi twisted in his arms and pointed towards the ocean. "Come see."

Slowly, Max stood up on shaking legs. Jirachi flew out of his arms and stared at him curiously. "What?"

"You're bigger," the legendary noted. "That's good!"

"I'm a trainer now," Max said, pride filtering through his voice as his fingers ghosted against his Pokéballs. "I can help too."

"Good." Jirachi nodded and tugged at his arm. "Come."

It might have been a little brash on his part, but he decided to go with Jirachi without waking up anyone else. They quietly made their way through the trees and towards the ocean, not saying a thing the entire time. It was only when they got to the edge of the shore that it occurred to Max that he had no idea if this Jirachi was actually his Jirachi and not a mirage. He knew that Yung had seen some of Ash's memories and didn't know exactly what that meant.

"We brought it to you instead." Jirachi said suddenly, pointing towards something in the water.

Max looked up and his mouth fell open.

Rising from the ocean was a massive structure made up with tiers of blue stones and a spiraling ramp that went all the way to the top. The moonlight seemed to glint off of the surface, giving it both a magnificent and eerie look. Max had seen this very structure before, and would never forget it.

Taking a step back, the young boy quickly turned and ran back to where his sister was, accidentally stumbling over Brock in the process.

"Max?" the young man asked as he sat up, rubbing his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Ignoring him, Max shook his sister and whispered, "May. May! Get up!"

"Wha—" she started to ask loudly, but he slapped a hand over her mouth and shushed her. She shot him a sour look, but he shook his head at her.

"Shh," Max hissed. "Come on, you have to come and see something. Now."

It might have been his serious tone, or it could have been her paranoia from everything that happened, but May was instantly up and being quiet. She quickly scrambled to her feet, almost stumbling, when Brock caught her.

"What's going on?" Brock asked, brown furrowing with worry.

"Come on," Max whispered again, urging them to go around everyone else who was sleeping quietly. Tracey was on the other side of the trees, quietly talking to Ash, so Max decided not to bother either of them.

Instead, he led May and Brock around the trees, back to where Jirachi floated, waiting patiently. Brock inhaled sharply, and May gasped at the sight of the little Pokémon.

"Hi," Jirachi said to them happily before pointing backwards, "we brought it to you."

"Brought..." Brock looked towards the ocean and gaped at the structure in the water. "You brought the Sea Temple to us."

"Go get Ash," May said as she nudged her brother, eyes never once leaving the water.

"Why? He'll probably know it's here and show up soon," Max pointed out.

Sure enough, only seconds after saying that, Ash skidded out of the trees, staring from them, to Jirachi, to the Sea Temple, to them, and finally back to Jirachi.

"Okay, maybe I need some sleep - more sleep – shh Brock you don't have to add anything to that – but I don't think you're the guardian of the water orb?" It came out as a question as Ash squinted at Jirachi.

The little Pokémon giggled and flew around his head. "I'm not. You know who is. Come on!"

Jirachi flew to the edge of the water, where a ramp was resting against the new shoreline. Ash looked at the others, who just shrugged or sent him mildly concerned looks. No one moved until he did, slowly making his way towards the familiar Sea Temple.

"Does this feel like some sort of trap?" Brock whispered to him. "A Mirage of this, maybe?"

"I don't think so," Ash said with a shake of his head. Max watched him squint his eyes. "It feels really real and the rest of the orbs back that way are brighter," he pointed behind him, "but there's something up there too."

May looked up at the cascading blue walls, memories flying back to her. She remembered when she first saw this building. She remembered when she first held Manaphy's egg and then the Pokémon itself. She remembered the warmth and happiness that she had felt while holding the sweet little Pokémon.

Then a frown pressed across her features. She remembered Jack Walker trying to convince Ash into manipulating her. She remembered being left behind with Ash in the Sea Temple as it began to fill with water.

May remembered studying the escape capsule wondering just how she and Ash would both fit in there, only to realize, with horror, that he had no intention of getting in with her. He had helped her inside, passed her Manaphy, Pikachu, and Ria, before slamming the door over her. Through the tiny window, she saw him lift up the crystal that was needed to stop the flooding, smile at her, and run.

Ash never talked about what happened that day, but she knew that he had been gasping for air when Kyogre brought him above the water. She knew that the temple had been completely submerged far longer than he could hold his breath.

She fought off those negative thoughts as she remembered Manaphy calling out to her, leaving with a smile.

"May!"

It was like she could hear his voice.

"Mama! May!"

The teenage girl stopped walking as it hit her that those words weren't coming from her memory. She spun around to stare at the side of the platform for only a split second before running towards it, her hair whipping behind her. She stopped at the edge, just in time for a tiny, blue Pokémon to jump up into her arms.

A bubble of laughter escaped her throat as May held Manaphy tightly. She nuzzled the little Pokémon, who had his own tears in his eyes. "Mama! May! Missed you!"

"I missed you too," May choked out, looking over her shoulder at Max, Brock, and Ash, who were watching with smiles. "You brought this to us, didn't you? You did this."

"Jirachi helped," Manaphy told her.

"How did you help exactly?" Max asked curiously, looking up at the legendary Pokémon. "Manaphy's the guardian, and the Sea Temple always moves, so how did you get it here?"

"Arceus woke me up early to help," Jirachi repeated. "I heard you praying and wishing. Both of you. All of you. I helped give Manaphy more power, since we used a lot of ours on other wishes you asked for."

"Other wishes?" Max raised an eyebrow. "What other wishes?" He looked towards May, but she was so focused on Manaphy that she said nothing. Instead, he glanced at Ash and Brock, who just shrugged.

"You wanted to help your sister," Jirachi explained. "You put all of your heart behind your wish, and she wanted her friend to be okay."

"What?" Ash asked slowly.

"Saved him, mama! For you!" Manaphy exclaimed proudly. Perhaps if the Pokémon used telepathy, his sentences would be fuller, but he chose not to, preferring to communicate like this.

"Saved...who?" May asked, staring at Manaphy with confusion.

"It took most of our power," Jirachi cautioned, suddenly sounding seriously. "We can't do it again, no matter what. That's why I had to help Manaphy now. Bringing someone back to life is really,

really hard."

"Who?" Ash demanded, his voice cracking within the single word. "Who did you bring back?"

"Your friend with green hair!" Manaphy said happily, staring at May.

Just like that, all of the air rushed out of her lungs and May felt like she couldn't breathe. "What?"

"Your friend that fell to save you and that other girl," Jirachi clarified. "He was gone but we fixed him and brought him back to you."

"Do you mean...it—he—do you mean Drew?" May choked out. Both Pokémon nodded, and she fell to her knees, a sob bursting out of her throat. "Drew's alive?"

"Uh-huh!" Manaphy nodded proudly.

"I left him with your parents," Jirachi added.

"Oh my Mew," May muttered in disbelief. It couldn't be true. She was finally starting to accept his choice. Not that him being alive negated that choice at all. She felt her hopes rise so high that if someone told her they were joking, she'd probably shatter and never be able to recover. "You mean it?"

They both nodded, and she believed them.

May started sobbing, hugging Manaphy with one arm and reaching out towards Jirachi with the other. Soon she was clutching both of them to her chest, muttering the words 'he's alive' over and over again.

Max awkwardly stood beside her, patting her shoulder. He looked towards Ash and Brock for help.

When Ash said nothing, Brock said, "You keep an eye on your sister. We'll go and find the orb." He clapped a hand onto Ash's tense shoulder, and led him into the temple, ignoring Max's pleading stare as they left him with his hysterical sibling.

For a brief moment, Brock felt awe at the inside of the temple. It was an amazing structure, but he couldn't really focus on it. Instead, he led Ash away from the entrance, only stopping when he was sure that no one else could hear them. "Ash?"

The teenager let out a sigh and then looked towards the top of the temple. "He's alive. Thank Mew, he's alive." He looked back down and buried his face into his hands. "The orbs almost fell out of the train we were on," he choked out. "So I—I made a choice. I chose to go after them instead of using my Aura to help Drew. I could have done it too. He's alive." His shoulders shook as he looked at Brock again, not crying, but with red-rimmed eyes. "He's alive."

Every new story that Brock heard caused him to internally cringe. He wished with every fiber of his being that he had been with his friends. Sometimes he wished that he had been able to get to Blackthorn City in time to go with them. If anything, he could have shouldered some of the emotional burden. Sure, it would have meant not being there when Lucy brought his siblings in, not getting the chance to talk with her and work with her, but it would have been worth it. He may be a bit of a goof when it came to women, but his friends and family always came before flirtations.

"I don't envy you," Brock said honestly. "No one should have to make the type of choices that you make. Especially not at your age. But those decisions do come your way, and you do find the

strength to make them the best that you can. It takes a strong person to put the greater good first."

What Brock thought would be an encouraging speech seemed to make Ash freeze on the spot for just a moment. The teenager looked back at his feet. "I think the orb is up that way."

"Ash!" Brock called out, but his friend kept going forward. He tried to think over what he had said, but couldn't figure out why it would have upset his younger friend.

Instead he followed him quietly, twisting up and around until Brock didn't quite know where they were. Finally, they stopped in front of the large shrine that housed the pointed crystals Brock remembered seeing.

Ash went around to the back of it, muttering something about Brock waiting there for a moment. The young man waited patiently, until his friend came back holding a glowing blue sphere.

"That's it," Ash said. "We have all of them." There was a pause. "I thought it would be more exciting."

"What happened, Ash? What did I say?"

Ash stared at the orb with sad eyes. "It takes a strong person to put the greater good first. That's all Red...my father, Dawn's father...that's what he put first. He was willing to watch them torture her, slowly kill her." Ash closed his eyes. "I'm just like him, aren't I? The greater good."

"No!" Brock blurted out so quickly that it startled Ash. "I didn't mean...Mew...you're not like Master Red. Well, no, you are. You have so many of the good qualities he's known for. But you're not cold like that. I meant it as a good thing." He once again put a hand on his shoulder. "Not all choices have to be for the greater good. Some can be for you too. Don't forget that."

Ash took a deep breath and nodded his head.

"Good man. Let's go get May and Max." Brock led the way out of the temple, almost wishing that he could take a little time to look around the temple, but he knew that they all needed sleep. They had one place left to go, and it would be a steady trip there.

When they got outside, May was still crying, but it wasn't quite as hysterical, and she was smiling. Max still seemed relieved to see them.

"We should go," Jirachi said, causing the young boy to frown.

"Do you have to?" he asked with pleading eyes.

"I'm sorry Max, it's best that we do. The more of us that still exist, the less messed up things are," Jirachi explained, patting the boy on the head. He looked at Ash. "You know where to go next, right?"

"Any chance you could get us there faster?" Ash asked.

"I'm sorry. Manaphy and I definitely can't, and Arceus wants us all to stay away if possible. I know Giratina wants to help but they've been on lockdown. I'm sorry."

Ash sighed and shrugged.

Manaphy nodded in agreement and patted May's cheek. "Need to go now."

"I know," May said, giving the Pokémon one last hug before allowing him to jump back in the

water. She hugged herself as she stood up, a wide smile taking up most of her face. "Thank you."

"Love you!" Manaphy called back. The group felt the temple jerk slightly under their feet, and hurried back onto the shore.

"I love you too!" May cried out, waving as Jirachi went into the temple, the force-field appearing around it as it sunk beneath the waves. She practically bounced on the spot before throwing herself at Ash, who stumbled backwards, not expecting it at all. "He's alive!"

"He is," Ash replied, hugging her back. "Because of you and Max."

Immediately, May let go of him and tugged her younger brother closer, ignoring his shouts of protest. Her eyes then went wide. "I need to tell Serena!" Without another word, she tore off towards the others.

"I thought she was going to choke me," Max said dramatically.

"Come on, let's get back, put that with the others." Brock nodded towards the orb in Ash's hand. "They'll probably be awake because of May anyway."

The three boys walked towards their camp, and sure enough, everyone was awake, watching May strangle (hug) Serena while babbling excitedly.

Gary glanced up at Ash, eyes landing on the orb in his hand. He gaped for only a moment before saying, "You got it."

Everyone went silent and looked towards him.

Ash went towards his bag, smiling warmly at Pikachu and Misty. He tipped over the bag, and seventeen orbs rolled out. He set the blue orb with the others, and stared at them all.

Everyone was completely silent, as if waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, Dawn said, "I'm almost disappointed. I expected a light show or something."

"Don't get kidnapped again," Iris said to Ash. "There is no way we'll get all of these a second time before Mirage Arceus destroys everything."

He nodded slowly before looking up, towards the direction of the Tree of Beginning. "Jirachi said the legendary Pokémon were basically on lockdown, including Giratina. We're on our own getting there."

"I guess that means we go to our old fall-back," Leaf said with a sigh and pointed her thumb over her shoulder towards the city. "Look around Cerulean and see if there are any working vehicles."

"Preferably things that can go off-road," Brock added, frowning a bit at the thought of stealing vehicles but knowing that there was really no choice at this point.

"We're really going there," Serena said, her voice raising slightly. "We really did it. We got them all, and now we're going to the end." She sounded nervous and excited all at the same time.

Ash slowly nodded, looking from one person to the next. "We're going to end this, one way or another."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

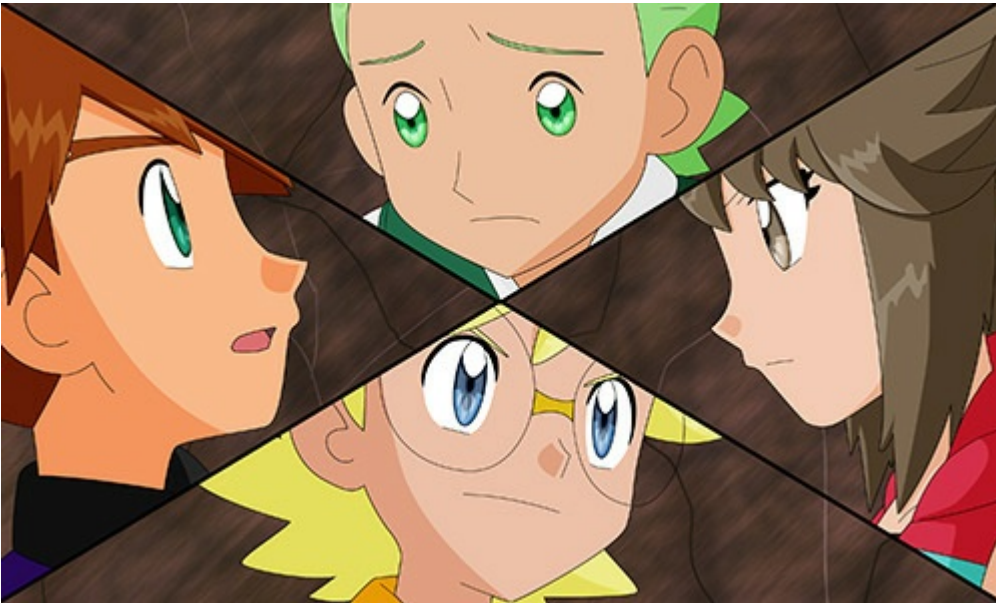
Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Back To The Beginning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



It was a peaceful night. The sky was clear, the moon was bright, the stars were twinkling, and though a bit chilly, the breeze was gentle.

As such, Queen Ilene slept peacefully in her chambers in Cameran Palace, despite the turmoil the rest of the world had plunged into. Perhaps it was the fact that Cameran Palace was far away from any major cities, or maybe it was the sheer amount of Aura flowing through the land freely kept everyone at peace. Whatever the case, they were spared the hardships everyone else had to face.

At least, they had been.

"Mime!" Mime Jr. called out, startled.

Queen Ilene jerked up in her bed at her Pokémon's distress. She pulled her blankets up to her chest when she realized that there was a large group of people surrounding her bed.

"Do not fret, your highness." She gazed around, her heart pounding in her chest when she realized who she was looking at. Though Cameran Palace appeared to be entirely old fashioned, they did have technology, and she did occasionally get the chance to view the news. She recognized the short, slicked hair and hulking figure of Giovanni. "We mean you no harm."

"What do you want?" Queen Ilene tried to keep herself calm, eyes flitting to her Mime Jr., willing him to stay silent for the moment.

"To walk and have a chat," he answered smoothly.

"As I am? Certainly not. It would be indecent!" she protested, her mind running through her options.

"Of course, you may have the chance to dress yourself properly, Your Highness." Giovanni turned to her bed. "We will wait outside with your Mime Jr. The women will help you." Though unstated, his threat was obvious to her. Mime Jr's life was on the line, and the female Grunts would know.

As soon as the men left the room, Queen Ilene threw the covers off of herself and hurried to get one of her dresses, not caring which one it was. She fixed her hair quickly, if only so she could look a little more put together so that any of her subjects would think that she had a better grasp on what was happening. If she appeared confident, maybe they could keep calm, and no one would be hurt.

Giovanni was waiting for her outside of her door, offering her his arm. If she didn't know what he was, she might have been almost charmed by him. After a quick glance assured her that Mime Jr. was safe, she slipped her arm through his and allowed him to lead her down the hallway.

"You're quite an intelligent woman," Giovanni started, and she realized that he was leading her towards the throne room. "Your trainer profile says that you have specializations in history and politics. I am impressed."

"You'll find I'm more than just a pretty face," she replied.

"Your intelligence is to my advantage," he admitted, coming to a stop in front of a large portrait of Sir Aaron. "I do wonder what it would be like to be able to wield a power such as that. Something so powerful yet specific to only you – no machines – no Pokémon – simply your own will." His eyes flickered towards her, to see her reaction. "I do know of one person. Only a boy. Ash Ketchum." He smirked as he saw her lips twitch, despite the fact that she tried to keep a straight face. "You know his name."

"He's a child of no consequence," Queen Ilene insisted.

"I thought so once as well. I thought he was simply another prize that Doctor Yung wanted. It turns out he is so much more than I ever could have thought. I was blind to a force that could very well stop my ambitions." His arm squeezed hers tighter. "He was the winner of a tournament here a few years ago, was he not?"

Knowing that the man already knew this answer, she relented. "Yes."

The man simply hummed in acknowledgment. "Tell me the history of this place. I want to hear it from an expert's lips." Mime Jr. cried in discomfort from where he was being held, and Queen Ilene's heart constricted. She was supposed to put everyone ahead of herself, but she just couldn't let them hurt Mime Jr.

"They're only legends. Some say that this is where everything began. That after Arceus created Mew, he created the Tree of Beginning for her. After that everything came from this."

"Some say that Mount Coronet is where everything began. The Spear Pillar specifically."

"They say that Sinnoh itself came from that, not the world," she corrected. "Even so, they're simply legends. What's fact is that there is a great deal of power here that is impossible to wield. If the Tree were to be destroyed, or damaged, it would devastate the world." Queen Ilene tried to hide the desperation in her voice.

"I have no interest in destroying the world," Giovanni assured her, though she didn't take any comfort in it. "Just to use the power to reshape it to my desires. A world where I alone rule." He let go of her arm and walked towards the picture. "I can understand why Ash Ketchum would wish to come here. So much power – power he can access where others cannot – to try and stop me with those orbs of his. I know now that he has a strong connection to the legendary Pokémon, and must assume he will have their help. That doesn't matter though. He will come, and he will fail in his quest." Giovanni turned to face her. "The Tree of Beginning is where my new world shall begin as well."

Queen Ilene felt her heart sink as the man walked so he was in front of his growing group of Grunts. "Begin climbing and wait for further instructions."

"What of the G-Men?" A woman with dark red hair asked.

"They are of little consequence now, even if they come here. We will defeat them. Arceus decimated Blackthorn City in our test. He will do the same to them."

"And the Ketchum boy?"

"As I said, he will come to the Tree. I am sure he will, and that's based off of his parents' personalities alone, let alone our intel. He will come, but he will never leave."

...

There was sweat peppering Lance's hairline, and he wasn't exactly sure why. His nerves were all twisted up, and it made him feel sick to his stomach to the point where it physically hurt. His heart was racing. If he wasn't able to focus, he'd swear that he was having some form of anxiety attack, although that didn't make sense in the least.

He was one of the youngest Champions in history – the only one to move on with the League when it changed so extremely from simply eight gyms and an Elite Four to a massive tournament system. He was one of the few people to lay claim to two Champion titles at once. He had gone head to head with Team Rocket when it was led by Sylvia Rocketti, defeating her and putting Team Rocket down for a short time. He was the head of Kanto and Johto's G-Men, constantly dealing with politics and paperwork on top of that. He was made to deal with stress.

Yet he found that his hands were shaking. It didn't make sense to him. He had faced life and death situations before. Hell, one time it even involved two legendary Pokémon in Hoenn when Steven had been unable to intervene.

Lance thought on that for a moment. Ash Ketchum had been there then, just like he had been for the Red Gyarados. Lance knew who he was. Lance had always known Ash was special in his own right too. If Red was going to bar him from becoming something great within the league, the Champion had his own plans to snap Ash up into the G-Men, whether the Master liked it or not. Still, he never knew just how special the boy was. He really should have seen it. The other Champions had poked fun at just how invested he appeared to be in the boy, after all.

Perhaps that was what had him so nervous. He could see the full picture now, and see it so painfully clear. His original plan to keep Ash safe forced the kids to flee and hide from both the regional Teams and the Leagues alike (though if he heard right, they weren't very successful in that). It had proved to be a foolish choice. The boy needed to be in this fight, and his friends weren't going to let him go alone.

Lance chuckled at that thought. They reminded him very much of Red, Green, Blue, and Yellow. Not including the fact that Ash, Gary, and Leaf were their children, and Misty looked painfully like her aunt. While those similarities were obvious, it was the loyalty and the strength when they were together that really connected the dots. He hated the thought of sending kids into war, but they weren't going to stop either way.

Was that what had him nervous? That he could see the parallels so clearly and knew that even if they won they might not really win? Would their children just grow to have to fight a newer version of Team Rocket all over? Or would there even be a world left after everything? They had so few options and were now heading for the one thing Lance had been desperately trying to avoid:

a head-on collision. He knew it was going to get ugly. He knew that there was very little that the Pokémon League and the G-Men could realistically do but fight Team Rocket and keep them busy, hoping that the kids would be there to do whatever it was they needed to do.

No, perhaps it was the fact that he had no real plan, no real way to know what was going to happen, that had him feeling so sick. Lance liked plans. Lance liked control. Lance had none of that and could see it very clearly. They had to rely on a group of young adults, teenagers and children.

His steel-blue eyes turned towards one of the trucks with an open back hatch. Master Red himself was sitting there, back straight, crimson eyes stern, a blank expression on his face. The fact that he was visibly paler than normal, and rather frail looking despite the rest and food he got in him, didn't diminish his aura of authority.

Lance could remember when Red was a kid too, only slightly younger than himself. He had always been rather quiet, but he had been a happy child all the same. He saw that same enthusiasm and determination in his son. Now it was like all the life had left him. He certainly lived up to his reputation of being silent, strong and mysterious. They had been friends for a very long time, working together as a force to be reckoned with when reshaping the Pokémon League – all of the others changing as Kanto and Johto had. Red trusted Lance with the knowledge of his son's identity.

But not his daughter. Not the fact that Red had cheated on his estranged wife that he essentially married out of duty and for profit, and sired a daughter from it. Lance had to wonder what other things his friend was hiding from him. No doubt things that would make him look bad in the eyes of others.

Tapping his fingers against the Pokéballs hidden by his cape, Lance watched Red read through something on a laptop that had been provided to him. He had everyone believing that he had a plan, and everyone blindly put their faith in him.

Lance had seen the distrust and anger in Ash's eyes. Lance had seen the sadness in Dawn's. Neither of Red's children were going to support or cooperate with the Master's plans. They were going to charge forward with their own, and the Champion had to wonder if his friend realized that.

Deciding that thoughts weren't going to fix the twisting ache of his stomach, Lance strode forward, his cape billowing behind him majestically. Stopping beside the truck, he didn't bother waiting for Red to acknowledge him. If he did, he would be standing there looking silly for who knows how long. He wondered if that was how he made the other Champions feel? "It's been confirmed that Giovanni's forces have taken over Cameran Castle. They're probably already at the Tree as well."

"Someone forgot the obvious and to check for bugs, so of course they are." Lance almost winced at Red's harsh words, and felt ire rise up in him. He couldn't be everywhere at once, making every little decision. It was almost too much for a Champion of one league, let alone two that were Ground Zero for Giovanni's madness. Not that Red would know what any of that was like from the top of his mountain.

"I apologize. I was focused on getting people out alive." That came out a lot more sarcastic than he meant it too, but Lance couldn't find it in himself to really care. "What I was getting at is that they're probably installing the Mirage System there."

"Most likely," Red agreed. A quick glance down at the screen told Lance that the Master was getting caught up on the concept of Mirage Pokémon, since he had been absent for their reveal.

"He'll be waiting for us."

"I assumed so."

"Are we going to do something about it?"

"In time."

Lance was tired of Red's simple, dismissive answers. "You don't seem to give a shit that the children you fathered are probably going to walk into a hopeless trap while we're sitting here twiddling our thumbs and waiting to move."

That made Red pause. His crimson eyes turned up, regarding Lance harshly. "I have tried to protect my children as any father would." He switched screens to a map that showed two little dots moving quickly.

It took Lance a moment to piece together what it was, and his heart sank a bit. "When did you bug them?"

"Irrelevant. They won't be in harm's way. Ash will do whatever it is that Arceus seems to think he can do, and then we'll extract him. Dawn won't go near the fight."

"Are you high from your meds, or are you just purposely being obtuse?" Lance asked, completely done. "If you knew anything about Ash at all, you'd know that even when he's injured or reluctant, he's the last person to back down from a challenge. He'll fight you tooth and nail to stay there. I've looked up Dawn, and she's got the same stubborn streak. Whatever plan you think you have, it's not going to work, Red." He ran a hand through his hair. "I don't like it either, but we're useless as anything else but a distraction and fighters against Team Rocket. No amount of planning is going to change that."

"So what? We just run in? We let kids fight for us?"

"You act like we weren't once the kids doing the fighting." Lance shook his head. "You act like you were never frustrated with the adults who never believed in any of you. Green acts the same. Delia doesn't though. She hates it, but she let Ash go, and she'd keep letting him go."

"You don't know. You're not a father," Red pointed out.

Lance snorted. "Just because you have biological children doesn't make you a father either."

There was actually a tint of pink to Red's cheeks, which was a bit of a victory. It made him look less like the walking dead. The Master looked like he was about to say something else, when a third person slid up to them.

"Now, now, Reddie," Green said while leaning her arm on the top of his head like it was an arm rest. "Don't get mad because of the truth. I love Leaf, I really do, but I was a shit mom and I know it. Delia was always a better mother to her. At least I was present. No point crying over spilled MooMoo Milk. Our kids are going to be fighting, and there's nothing we can do about it."

Red scowled at her. "You know what we went through."

"Yeah, I do, and we're already too late to stop them from going through hell too," Green scowled. "If Blue was here, he'd punch you for being so thick-headed. Which would be...ironic since he was the thick-headed one." She shrugged. "Now if you two fine gentlemen are done bitching at one another, I'd like to get a move on to try and set ourselves up to try and surprise Team Rocket." She shook her head. "Honestly, if Yellow was here, she'd have this all organized and we would already be there." She eyed Red. "Is that why you insisted that she stay behind? Because you knew she'd

take over and everyone would love it?"

"No." Red made a face at her, completely ignoring her joke. "Delia gave up being Yellow in every way possible. It wasn't just a name or a hair-colour change. She'd just get in the way now. She's not who she used to be."

Green glanced at Lance before crossing her arms in front of her chest and glaring at Red. "You think you're the same as when you were younger? Don't make me laugh. None of us are. Delia's probably stronger than either of us at this point. She lived happily with her son, even as he started to follow the same path you did. You say she gave everything up. I say she just adapted and figured out how to live. Who really showed Team Rocket in the end?"

Lance nodded his head in reluctant agreement. He could see where she was coming from.

Red wavered slightly but then said, "That's not the type of strength we need right now."

Green smiled almost bitterly. "True. That's the funny thing, really. You may be the Master, but all together, the kids are the strong ones now." At Red's stare, she continued her thought. "We failed. We failed to stop Team Rocket years ago. Delia suffered from it. Blue, his wife, and sister suffered from it. Misty, her brother, and his wife suffered from it. You and I did too, in different ways. Lance, I know you had issues with your family after that too. We failed. Maybe we're not the ones who can win this. Maybe it has to be Ash, and Leaf, and Gary, and Misty, and everyone else. Maybe it had to be them all along."

Red tapped his foot on the ground, both impatient and thoughtful. "Maybe, but unlike you, I'm not going to sit around and rely on that." His eyes turned to Lance. "And I'm not willing to run head first like you are. There has to be a plan."

"We can't make a concrete plan when most of the variables are unknown to us," Lance pointed out. "I never said we can't try to do something, but not to the extent you seem to think we can."

"And I never said that I wasn't going to do something," Green snapped. "Of course I'm going to fight Team Rocket. Maybe if we can help get rid of them for good this time it might be enough to honour Blue and everyone else. I'm just saying that, in the end, maybe the kids are the ones who will make the biggest impact."

Red said nothing on either of those points. He knew that his two friends could very well be right, but he wasn't willing to rely on that. Sure, they had been the same age, even younger, when they themselves had faced Team Rocket, but it was different. Madame Boss was cruel and clever, but Giovanni was a complete madman. It wasn't the same thing at all.

Besides, the comparison did nothing to assure him. They had failed in getting rid of Team Rocket. Who was to say that this group of kids would be any different? He wasn't about to leave it to chance, not this time.

Lance and Green both seemed to understand that, while hearing them, Red was going to continue forward with his plans. They exchanged worried looks.

Lance felt even worse than before.

...

James' brow furrowed as he stared down at the black and white board in front of him thoughtfully. He tapped his finger against his chin a couple times before slowly reaching out to touch one of the white pieces. He hesitated momentarily before moving it and looking at the elderly woman sitting

across from him.

Despite the move from the base in Blackthorn City to another undisclosed one (Jessie and James had both quickly figured out that they were in Mahogany Town), Sylvia Rocketti - Madame Boss, didn't seem put out at all. She wore her shackles like they were the finest of bracelets, and sat as if the guards were there as her own personal security and her plastic hair was a throne.

James had to admire her, even if he genuinely did want to put distance between himself and Team Rocket.

"Tell me," Sylvia said abruptly in her silky tone, "Did you choose to stay to keep an old woman company, or do the G-Men not trust you? Surely there is another woman you'd like to spend time with instead."

James' green eyes met her silver ones. He didn't give anything away for a moment, thinking carefully on what to say next. He chose to address her first questions, but ignore the third part. "A bit of both, I think." He tapped his finger on the table as he waited for Sylvia to move one of her pieces on the chess board. "Is Giovanni really Jessie's father?" He mentally cursed, not wanting to be so forward in what he wanted.

Sylvia cracked a sly, knowing smile. "Very much so. It's hard to believe, I know. She looks like her mother."

"Huh." James stared at her thoughtfully and decided to take a gamble. "It's just... I heard that the boss—Giovanni's child was really young. Only a teenager."

For a split second, that seemed to catch her genuine attention. The look faded as quickly as it came. "You seem to be under the impression that men can't spawn children as they get older. Trust me, there are ways to get a penis to work even when it doesn't want to." James squawked awkwardly, and she chuckled before switching topics. "My son must have had a second child. Tell me about him or her." She moved a piece of the board.

James wet his lips with his tongue as he scanned the board, glad to have something to focus on. Madame Boss' eyes were very unnerving. "From what I heard, he's a boy, a teenager now, and Ariana was his mother."

Sylvia actually snorted, startling him a bit. "Of course she was. Ariana was always a stuck up with an obsession for my son. She would blindly do anything that he asked, even if it meant bending over a table. She must have been a horrible mother."

"From what I heard, she wasn't really one," James admitted with a shrug, making his move on the board. "Kind of just left him in the care of random people in Team Rocket. The boy ran away from Team Rocket, and tends to change his name a lot, or so the rumours say. If I remember right, his birth certificate says Sylvester Rocketti, but I heard a lot of people call him Silver." James glanced up at her. "He has your eyes."

"Silver," Sylvia repeated thoughtfully. "Hmm...perhaps I can see my grandson one day." Her unnerving eyes snapped to his. "What is it you want?"

"I want?" James asked, desperately trying to stop his voice from squeaking. He was mildly successful.

"You offered me information that would genuinely interest me. You claim that you 'heard' Giovanni had a child, but then gave me exact information on him, even down to his eye colour."

She raised an eyebrow. "You're good, James, but I'm better."

His shoulders slumped a bit. "Do you think he'll come after Jessie?"

"My son? If he gets what he wants, that's almost a certainty. It'd be best for you to flee should he defeat the League. Run as far as you can. Though from what I understand, that might be impossible." Sylvia eyed him with a knowing smirk. "You love her." She moved her black piece.

"I do," he agreed, quickly moving his next piece.

"I meant in more than a platonic way." She countered him on the board quickly.

"So did I." He moved yet another piece.

Sylvia eyed him, looking rather smug at his declaration. "To me, Team Rocket was simple. It was about power and control, but not with this type of ridiculousness. We had poise and dignity. We respected the legendary Pokémon and went about our business in the shadows, controlling the money and the people in power." She looked at the chessboard thoughtfully. "My son will not be successful in this endeavor; the power will be too much for him if he gets it. He probably will. Lance and Red are too short-sighted to stop him."

James felt affront, but not for his sake. He certainly believed that the boy who had saved the world time and time again could do it one more time, especially with all of his friends backing him. He quickly realized that Sylvia had no way of knowing that. "Maybe they are – Lance and Red – but that doesn't mean that someone can't stop him." Someone who had faced Mirage Pokémon before. Someone who had faced down raging legendary Pokémon and psychopaths before. James had seen nearly all of those victories, and had even helped his fair share.

That made him freeze.

"Here's hoping they do," Sylvia agreed, moving her piece. "Checkmate."

James stared blankly at the board. He hadn't seen that move coming, and felt like he should have been prepared for it. He should have seen it coming, but he had moved his pieces in the wrong places.

His eyes turned up to meet hers and he held out his hand. "Thank you, Madame. You're a good opponent. We should play again sometime."

A smirk crossed her face. "Oh, I'm sure we will, James. Now shouldn't you be off to find a certain woman?"

James was standing up already. "Yes, you're right." Just not for the reason she probably thought she was.

He was quick in leaving the room, impatiently waiting for the guards to check him over to make sure he wasn't delivering some kind of secret message. Once they were done, he walked quickly, running once he was out of sight. He needed to find Jessie and Meowth, and he needed to find them now.

...

In retrospect, Brock felt a little stupid for assuring Tracey and Cilan that the drive to the Tree of Beginning would be a smooth one. Now that they were bumping and bouncing along, he distinctly remembered the rough terrain during their first trip there. Of course, he had been secure in the

passenger seat at the time while Ash, Misty, May, and Max bumped along in the back.

A stab of pain hit him as he thought of Kidd Summers and how she had been on Giovanni's list. Ash and Red were the only ones to escape that genocide. He had seen the list and knew so many people on it. It was easy just to pretend that they were names on paper and that the people existed somewhere else in the world, but he knew it wasn't true.

A grunt to his right broke Brock out of his morbid thoughts. He quickly glanced over to the passenger seat at Misty, who was holding onto the handle above her head. The compact SUV that they managed to salvage really needed new shocks, making the ride even more painful than normal. "You okay?"

"Fine. I mean, I feel like my organs are going to get knocked out of me, but I'm good," Misty replied sarcastically, earning a snort of amusement from the young man.

Pikachu nodded in agreement with the redhead. He had originally been with his trainer, but given that the boy was distracted and couldn't keep a hold of him to stop him from flying into the roof at every big bump, Pikachu had abandoned him. Instead, he took up residence in Misty's lap and was incredibly comfortable there.

"What are you talking about? This ride is as smooth as butter," Ash quipped from the back, where he was trying to concentrate on Dawn's hands.

"How's it going back there?" Brock asked, choosing not to address his sarcasm.

"My hands actually do feel the tiniest bit better," Dawn admitted, moving her bare fingers a bit. They were still red, raw, patchy, and rather ugly to look at, but they felt better. "I guess Aura can't heal all the tiny things."

"Stupid Aura," Ash muttered, clearly annoyed at his inability to completely heal his friend's – his sister's – hands.

"Maybe it's based on knowledge too," Brock suggested. "For instance, someone very familiar with skin or bones on a microscopic level might be able to heal that too, since they know what to look for."

Ash seemed to think about that for a moment before looking dismayed. "Too much studying."

Dawn laughed and knocked the top of his head with the back of her hand. "Listen to that echo. You could do with more studying to fill it up."

"You're hilarious. Seriously," he replied dryly.

Dawn fluttered her eyes innocently. "I'm your little sister. Actually your little sister, not just in an I-see-you-as-a-brother type of way. You know, in a we-share-the-same-douchebag-genes kind of way. I'm supposed to tease you."

Brock and Misty quickly exchanged looks. Neither of them had really heard Ash and Dawn talk about that in great depth before.

Ash tapped her forehead. "Other way around. Big brother's supposed to embarrass little sister in any way possible. But only big brother is allowed. No one else." His tone was light, and it was obvious that he was kidding.

That one simple exchange told both Misty and Brock everything they needed to know. Maybe the

idea of Red being their father, of him being a cheater that abandoned not just one family, but two, was still unsettling, but the idea of being half-siblings was easily accepted.

"Seriously," Dawn spoke up in a soft voice. "Don't worry about it. It's fine. You shouldn't waste your strength on me when it's not life or death."

Misty twisted slightly to look back at them, careful not to jostle Pikachu. "She's got a point. Healing wipes you and your Aura out faster than anything else. Healing a really bad wound would make you useless, so you should save your strength."

Ash sighed and shrugged, not truly acknowledging that fact, though it was very true. A part of his mind shot back to when he had lifted the Aura right out of the grass below him – a source of strength when he had barely any left – but shuddered at the thought. He was never going to do that again.

Instead of dwelling on those thoughts, he turned his attention back to Dawn. "At least let me help you get the ointment on."

"Okay." She tried to keep her hands steady, wincing when a bump would ram them into Ash's. They did feel better, but were still understandably sore.

Ash quickly apologized and carefully made sure to get the ointment on her hands, wrapping them in the thin bandages so the wounds could breathe. Dawn studied him closely, watching the way his brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed.

On one hand, it was so mind-boggling that her friend was her half-brother, but on the other, it just felt right. Dawn had always seen Ash like an older sibling anyway, but now she knew that he was, on (at least partially) a biological level. Despite what she learned about her biological father, she was excited to have an actual older brother too.

Everyone else had been shocked to hear the truth, but once the impact of what that said about the Pokémon Master passed them, it didn't change anything. There was no reason that it would.

Out of nowhere, silver eyes, shaggy purple hair, and a scowl popped into her mind. A giggle bubbled up in Dawn's throat, and Ash's brown eyes rose to look at her questioningly.

"Sorry," she said, still smiling. "I'm just picturing Paul's face when he learns you're my brother."

Ash stared at her blankly before a grin appeared on his face as he barked out a genuine, short laugh. His smile vanished as quickly as he came, his eyes falling back to her hands. "He'd probably hate me even more."

"What? Why?" That startled her.

"It depends on Reggie," Ash admitted, not meeting her eyes. "I mean think about it from his point of view. He blames me in part. If he lost a brother and I gained a sister..."

"With his temper, that probably would turn out badly," she agreed, wincing a bit. "I never thought of that."

"That's okay."

"It's not though! Thinking things through like that might really help us!" Dawn protested.

No one responded to that, knowing that she was partially right, and wouldn't actually hear any

other opinion at the moment.

"I have a question," Misty said, leaning her head back against the seat to glance into the back. "Do you think that the legendary Pokémon knew that all of this was happening all along?"

"You think they just let it happen?" Dawn asked, suddenly sounding concerned.

"Well, despite what it looked like to us, this had to be in the works for years," Brock pointed out. "It's not like Team Rocket hasn't tried to create their own powerful legendary Pokémon in the past. It might explain why so many near world-ending incidences happened."

"No, that was because Arceus was gone. He can normally control them to stop things like three birds fighting over islands and messing up the ocean currents," Ash said, finishing gently tapping the clips into place around Dawn's bandages. "Arceus was gone because of Marcus's actions. Damos was the Chosen One of the time, but he had been bound by those stupid shackles that some dark thing created. People did that. Then for some reason there apparently wasn't a Chosen One between me and Damos. Just champions picked by legends from time to time." He frowned. "If Arceus would have been around, I bet this wouldn't have happened. This place was a mess when he got back." He paused. "Not that I ever saw him try to help."

"I suppose that makes sense," Brock conceded thoughtfully. "One thing after another kept happening, and with the Pokémon thrown out of whack because Arceus had been gone so long, it would have made a huge mess to fix when he got back." Apparently thousands of years' worth of messes, if what Ash said was true.

"So we were just unlucky to be around at the point of time when things got bad?" Misty asked, though it was really a rhetorical question since they all knew the answer.

"Well, let's hope we get a little help this time at the Tree," Brock replied. "And they don't completely leave us hanging."

"No one else knows about what the Tree can do," Ash pointed out. "Unless Yung got it from Kidd, but I don't think he did. If those...blob things react like they did last time, it'll be bad for us. If the League's there, they'll be attacked too." He didn't mention that Team Rocket being hunted down would be a good thing for them, but it was certainly on their minds. As if to assure everyone else, Ash added, "I know how to keep them away now." He had saved Misty last time, and he was so much stronger now. Ash was positive he could keep his friends safe as long as they were with him.

"You think that we have to go inside of the Tree?" Misty asked him worriedly.

Ash snorted, and to everyone in the vehicle, he looked both amused and bitter. "I think we have to go all the way to the Arceus-damn top."

...

As Gary stared down at the walkie-talkie in his hand, he couldn't help but gulp and fidget nervously. He was trying to keep it subtle so that no one else would notice, and was glad that Leaf seemed distracted by May and Max in the back seat.

Despite the fact that he was driving, Tracey still caught onto the movement. Gary blamed his Watcher's eyes. "Are you alright?"

Gary hesitated, viridian eyes looking out the window to avoid eye contact. "Yeah. I guess I feel a little bit..." He didn't want to say scared or nervous, but they were the two words that came to mind first. They weren't the problem though.

"Me too," Tracey said, even though Gary didn't finish his sentence. He still knew exactly what he was going to say. "We're heading towards what will probably end up being a trap – no doubt to fight hordes of Rocket Grunts and probably Mirage Pokémon too. It's okay to be nervous."

"Oh, well yeah, there's that," Gary admitted, running a hand through his hair. "That wasn't what I was getting at though." He tapped the walkie-talkie.

"You feel guilty," May spoke up from the back seat, startling both young men a bit. Neither of them had realized the conversation behind them had stalled when they started talking.

Gary glanced back at May and shrugged. "Maybe."

May looked down at her clasped hands. "Me too."

"You shouldn't," Leaf insisted. "We're doing the right thing."

"Maybe on paper we are, but doesn't this seem...I don't know...a little too close to home?" Gary asked her slowly. "This is exactly what my dad and your mother did when Red went to take on Madame Boss." They hadn't spoken about their parents and the shared history that they had ever since it was revealed that Leaf's father had killed Gary's family.

"It is," Leaf admitted, "but it worked. My mom and your dad did whatever they could to get Red to stop her, even if it meant putting themselves in danger." She wondered where Delia had been during that, since her part of the story wasn't public knowledge or even part of the whispers of what really happened. It was a funny thing, knowing that the rumours weren't accurate either.

"Ash is going to hate us," Gary groaned. It was selfish, but that was something he really didn't want to happen. He had just gotten his friend back relatively recently. He didn't want to lose him again.

"I'd rather have him hate us than have the world end."

"Why do you always do that?" Gary snapped, leaning back more to see her. "Act like you're always okay with the logical answer? You're just a person too." He was a highly logical person himself, but his grandfather always said that his emotions tended to get the best of him. Gary had always denied that, but maybe the man had been right all along.

"We need to think logically," Max insisted, ignoring May's quick hissing to be quiet and stay out of the argument. "It might be hard but..."

"No buts," Leaf insisted, clutching her hand in a fist. "When we get to the Tree, the odds of Team Rocket being there are high. The odds of the League being there to fight back is pretty high too, because they're not going to just trust us. Without Arceus, we're just kids in their eyes. This is going to get ugly." She suddenly looked uncomfortable and looked at Max. "Maybe you should get out of the way."

"It won't be safe anywhere else nearby," Max pointed out with a shrug. He was definitely nervous, but did a good job at keeping a straight face. "I might as well stay with everyone else. Even if we get split up."

"Just stick with me," May told her brother, squeezing his shoulder. Her expression was serious, her grip strong. "I couldn't protect you the last time we were here, but I will this time. I know you'll protect me too."

"Of course I will!" Max agreed fiercely. "It's not any of that, it's just...lying to Ash. I don't like it."

His eyes fell. "We agreed to stick together."

"And we'll try, as long as we can," Tracey assured him. "We'll stay together, but if things get bad and someone needs to stay behind in order to get Ash to where he needs to go, then it's what we have to do."

"We're not really lying," May insisted, suddenly looking uncomfortable with her own words. "We're just not telling the entire truth."

"That's called lying by omission," Max deadpanned.

Gary eyed everyone in the back seat before turning to look at Tracey again. "You're really okay with this? Going behind Ash's back."

"I don't want to do that," he admitted. "We don't have much of a choice though. Ash won't agree with this plan, and in order to save everyone, we can't let him stay back to fight every grunt or potential Mirage Pokémon." He shook his head and focused on the road in front of them. "You know, I keep thinking back to Shamouti Island. Not when we were just there, but years ago."

"What about it?" Everyone in the back had fallen silent again, listening with rapt attention.

"I never could have guessed that Ash being called 'The Chosen One' would be such a big thing." Tracey shrugged.

Gary snorted. "No one would have known. Ash was always just...Ash." Leaf nodded in agreement. It was hard for her to picture the child she had grown up with having such a great destiny, even if that was the reality they now faced.

"That's exactly why it does work though," Tracey argued. "Ash is Ash. I couldn't do it if it were me. I wouldn't have it in me. The sheer stubbornness, the desire to help absolutely everyone. It's the exact same thing that just draws other people to him, you know? Ash...he makes people better."

"I'd agree with that," Max said with a nod of his head. "Even if he wasn't some prophesized Chosen One, Ash would still be trying to help in any way that he could in this situation."

"You think?" May asked, though she sounded more like she wanted some assurance on that, not that she disbelieved it.

"Definitely," Max insisted with a stern nod. "He wouldn't have run."

Leaf looked at the young boy curiously before looking out the window, leaning on the cool glass. She thought back to the despair in Ash's eyes, the defeat, and resistance he showed to finding the orbs. Yet, he still went with them, showing moments of strength and leadership. He himself would have said he gave up, but even then, his actions showed otherwise. He let other people lead him, take the reins, but he was still there.

When she thought about it that way, it actually wasn't at all hard to connect the images of the boy she had known years ago, and the boy she knew now.

Max was right, and that gave Leaf assurance enough that they were doing the right thing, even if it meant deceiving and lying to their friend along the way.

...

Cilan tapped his fingers against the steering wheel in the rhythm of a song he couldn't truly recall. There was one part of it that just kept swirling around in his head, mocking him and driving him insane. He tried to focus on the vehicles Tracey and Brock were driving in front of him, but his mind kept wandering.

A quick glance sideways let him see that Iris was still leaning against the window, taking in their surroundings with interest. It would be easy to think that she would have been bored a long time ago, but with every new landscape that they drove by, she seemed absolutely fascinated.

Cilan could almost taste how much she wanted to explore.

"What's beyond the mountains?" Iris asked curiously, breaking through the silence of the car. She didn't really expect an answer, none of them were from Kanto after all, but decide to voice the question anyway.

"Well, according to history, there's not much on the other side of the Silver Mountain Range anymore," Clemont answered while pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. Of course if anyone in the car knew Kanto's history, it would be him. "From what I read, years ago, like when Professor Oak would have been young, there was a war between the north and south in Kanto, divided by the mountains. So technically Kanto extends beyond the mountains, but there's nothing there anymore."

"What happened to it? Shouldn't something be there even if there was a war?" Serena asked curiously.

"You'd think, but no. Northern Kanto was left in ruins – a complete wasteland where no one could live and very little could grow. Those who survived came back down to what we know as Kanto. There weren't many survivors though. Apparently it also pretty much wiped out Professor Oak's generation too. That's why Kanto seems so young compared to other places. They basically had to start all over again."

"A lot of places will have to start over after this too," Bonnie added, surprising everyone. "What? I got bored and snuck around a lot. I know what's up."

"Just the physical changes to the landscape would change everything," Iris agreed. "The fissure that was created between Kanto and Johto. The coastline by Cerulean City. The map from those two things alone will look awfully different."

"Change wouldn't be a bad thing," Cilan insisted. "Not really. If this type of catastrophe could arise in a world like this, maybe we do need it to change."

"Traditions are important too," Iris argued. "Not everything needs to change."

Serena clapped her hands together, interrupting any argument that could erupt from the different points of view. "Let's just hope history doesn't entirely repeat itself and that most people live."

That was something they could all agree on.

Clemont pursed his lips slightly at that thought and looked at his younger sister. "Bonnie, you're going to stay close, alright? Things will get bad, so make sure you're with me or Serena, and that Dedenne is always right you, alright?" He looked down. "I wish you weren't coming at all, but it's too dangerous to leave you somewhere else."

"I'll be okay," Bonnie insisted, her voice not wavering in the least. She petted Dedenne's head without looking at her Pokémon, pale blue eyes brimming with determination. "Ash will get the

orbs to where Arceus needs them and do whatever he has to do." There was absolutely no room for argument with her.

Bonnie might not have gone with them on their journey, she didn't have those experiences, but what she did have was absolute, unwavering certainty that Ash would never let them down. He was very much like herself in spirit, and even if he did seem a little sadder and more serious now, Bonnie still believed in him. She was pretty sure that even if she saw him break down crying in front of her, she would still believe in him.

To everyone else in the car, that unwavering certainty and optimism was actually a relief to hear. They all believed in Ash too, but Bonnie was just so confident in her words even when no one else could be.

"That's right!" Serena slung an arm around Bonnie's shoulder. "Ash can do it, but we still need to be careful. This is different from anything we've ever done before. It's been and will keep being a lot more dangerous."

"I know that, but we can't turn back!" Bonnie crossed her arms over her chest, Dedenne mimicking her. "If there was no hope at all, we would be running and hiding. We'd be staying together for the last little bit! There still is hope though, and none of us can back off now, not even me! See if I'm there, if Max is there, that shows that you have some faith that we'll be okay and that says more than words ever could."

Clemont gaped at his sister in surprise, before pride flooded him. He could see the type of woman Bonnie was going to become, and he liked what he saw. His little sister that sometimes got on his nerves was absolutely right in her unwavering beliefs.

"That's very insightful, Bonnie," Cilan agreed, beyond impressed with the young girl's spirit, conviction, and wisdom.

"You're right. We'll watch out for each other, and we'll pull though. If anyone can pull this off, it's us!" Iris exclaimed with excited encouragement. Bonnie beams and nodded eagerly.

"As long as we stick to the plan," Clemont pointed out. He didn't want to rain on anyone's parade, but they couldn't entirely stay together, not realistically. Not with the promise that they all made behind Ash's back.

"If things go bad, someone, or a couple people, stay behind to deal with the issues while everyone else keeps getting Ash up to where he needs to go, even if that means only one person in the end is left with him," Serena said rather grimly, summing up their promise. They all knew that Ash was going to be extremely unhappy with these turns of events, but they were counting on Misty being able to muscle him away. The redhead wasn't exactly thrilled that her role meant she too would have to abandon whoever fell behind, but it was what they agreed on.

Ash was going to be furious. He would never want someone to sacrifice themselves for him. This was bigger than what he wanted though. It was bigger than what any of them wanted. The fate of the world was resting on their shoulders, and they were going to do what it took to protect it.

Even if that meant sacrificing themselves.

...

"What's taking so long with the last of those projectors?!" Ariana bellowed at the frantically working people. "This should have been finished already!"

"Apologies, ma'am," a rather rattled looking Grunt said to her almost reluctantly. "Without Doctor Yung, things aren't going as smoothly. Plus the terrain is worse than we anticipated—"

"Are you telling me that you're all incompetent?" she demanded.

"No, ma'am. We're just—"

"I don't want to hear it," she interrupted impatiently. "Yung is dead, but that doesn't matter. The Boss wants this finished, and he wants it finished before anyone in the Pokémon League can show up to mess anything up. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," a bunch of people around her muttered and scurried away.

Ariana smirked as she watched them work. It was good to have people listen to her with such fear. They feared her more than they feared the place that they were in. She wasn't deaf; Ariana had certainly heard all of the whispers amongst the Grunts. The Tree and its glowing crystals made them all anxious. She too could feel the power pulsing beneath their feet, but she didn't fear it, she embraced it.

Others whispered their worries about the fact that there was evidence of Pokémon living within the Tree, but all of them appeared to have abandoned their home as if they knew there was a disaster coming. It was childish to worry, because of course there was a disaster coming. They were bringing it.

Ariana's eyes looked upwards, towards the top of the Tree. Though everything was made from stone and crystal, something still felt very alive, and it was a feeling that seemed to get worse the higher up someone went. She herself hadn't gone far before returning to her station at the base of the Tree, but she had briefly felt it too. She also would have sworn that she saw a few crystals flash orange briefly, but she had only seen it once so she shrugged it off.

The Tree of Beginning may have been a strange place, but it was nothing to fear. In fact, there was nothing left to fear but them, and Ariana took great pride and comfort in that.

"Ariana," Archer said as he approached. "I heard from the upper levels that everything is finished. We're just waiting on this group." He tapped his foot on the ground and put a hand on his hip. "Some Grunts have reported seeing G-Men close by. Petrel was wondering if we should proceed with the Mirage Pokémon."

She wanted to gloat. It must have pained Archer to have to go to her for permission, when he was proud of his own status within Team Rocket. It was nothing compared to hers now. Not since Sylvester.

Her mind went to the boy she had happily given birth to, all for the Boss. She was ecstatic when she found out she was to have a boy, and then severely disappointed to see his hair, the same dark red as her own. Most of his looks favoured her, unfortunately. As luck would have it, Giovanni claimed that the boy had inherited his mother's eyes. At least there was that small victory. One small thing, followed by a series of one disappointment after another.

Ariana shrugged off the thoughts of the insolent boy who dared defy them, defy her, and most importantly, defy his father. He would certainly get what was coming to him when Giovanni shaped the world in his glorious image.

"The Boss has made our usage of Mirage Pokémon very clear," she answered, turning her nose up at him. "Are you questioning him?"

Archer eyed her warily. "Of course not. Having more than one would be an asset though. We could wipe out the G-Men and what remains of the Kanto and Johto Pokémon League before they even enter the Tree to attempt to stop us."

"Let them go," she replied with the wave of her hand. She spoke with absolute certainty. "They won't stand a chance."

"If you say so."

...

"There you go, sweetie," Delia said to the young child sitting before her, having put a bandage on his arm to cover the scratch that was there. "Good as new!"

The little boy smiled broadly at her with a toothy, innocent grin. He hurried away to where his mother was getting bandaged up. Delia watched with a smile as the mother and son embraced one another, a wave of longing rushing over her. Not long ago, her own son used to smile like that. She distinctly remembered seeing that smile when he came home for Christmas.

Sure, Ash wasn't the little boy that she used to cuddle to help him fight off his nightmares. He was growing up, in love with an amazing girl, with so many good friends. She was so proud of him, even if she longed for him to stay the same little boy who used to drive her crazy at times. No matter how old he got though, even as he became a moody teenager, he still had that vibrant smile filled with child-like wonder.

As Delia helped wrap up a man's arm, she let her thoughts wander over her son. Her little boy didn't smile anymore. She despised that pain and sadness that plagued his eyes now. Already, she was thinking of different ways she could help him after this was over. It never occurred to her that her son would fail.

She hated the fact that she let him go willingly, but that was what Delia had always done. She never wanted to stand in the way of his dreams, of what he deemed important. She always made sure that he knew his thoughts and ideas were completely valid, and that she would support him in whatever he wanted to do. Delia had always gone out of her way to encourage Ash, to look at his changing interests not as being unable to stick with one thing, but as the opportunity to explore something new.

Conflictingly though, she wished that she was the type to coddle him more. She hated herself for the fact that she willingly let him go, she encouraged him once again, and now his smile was gone and he wasn't okay. What kind of mother was she?

There was nothing she could do about that now, Delia silently acknowledged, but that didn't stop her heart from squeezing painfully. Her son had escaped Mirage Arceus' attack with his friends, but now he was heading into a warzone, and there was nothing that she could do about it.

"Mime!" Delia jumped slightly and looked around at Mimey, who eyed her with worry.

She smiled weakly and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm alright, Mimey. I promise." Her Pokémon was helping by teleporting the more injured patients that they encountered to the hospital.

"Mime mime," he said, projecting his thoughts in a more comprehensive way to her.

"Of course you can go and help Samuel now. I'm sure he's even more busy than I am. Go on." She nodded and though it was a bit reluctantly, her Pokémon vanished.

Delia let her smile fall as she looked around the people. So many of them were helping, but she still felt like she should have been able to do more. Mimey was the only Pokémon that she had now.

Not for the first time, she felt a painful longing for the Pokémon that she once trained when she was younger. How she missed them dearly. If she was younger, she would have run into the action with her friends, but now she would only be a liability. Still, Delia desperately wanted to find her son, if only to shield him one last time.

Maybe a part of Red had known that she would do exactly that. Maybe that was why he had personally insisted that she stay in Mahogany Town to help the injured refugees. After years of bandaging up her hyperactive, accident-prone child, she was quite good at it, so it was certainly putting her strengths to good use. She wanted to believe that the Red she had been friends with, the Red that she had loved once, cared enough for her and Ash to go out of his way to make sure she would be there to help their son when everything was said and done.

"Miss Delia, do you need more bandages?"

Delia blinked as she was pulled out of her thoughts. Tilting her head upwards, she caught sight of Tilly Slate, who was loaded with a pile of towels and bandages that seemed to be taller than her.

Delia smiled warmly at the girl and took some from her. "Thank you, Tilly. You, your brothers, and sisters are a big help!"

Tilly smiled warmly. "Thank you, Miss Delia. We want to! Brock always helped us, and now we can help everyone else while he's away. Lucy said it would be a good idea!"

"Lucy's absolutely right," she agreed. Though she only had brief interactions with her, Delia already liked the young woman that seemed to have taken it upon herself to help Brock's family when he couldn't. It was nice to see him getting some help, since Brock had given up so much to take care of his siblings. Delia didn't want to think badly of the dead, but his parents' maturity had been questionable. "Do you like her?"

"Yeah! A lot!" Tilly's smile fell. "Mom and dad would have liked her too, and they would have wanted us to help."

As much as she disproved of Flint and Lola Slate's parenting practice, she was not about to voice that to a child who had so recently lost said parents.

Instead, Delia placed a hand on Tilly's shoulders and squeezed gently. "They'd both be so proud of all of you. And if you ever need anything, you can come and find me, alright? I'll do what I can to help."

Tilly smiled at her and nodded. "Thank you, Miss Delia." She rearranged the bandages and towels in her arms, and hurried off to the next person.

Delia's shoulders slumped. It wasn't just her son. So many young people had lost so much already. She felt selfish focusing on her own son, but there was so little that she could do. Really, the only thing she could do was keep bandaging people up and believe in her son.

She owed him her faith, at the very least.

...

The wind generated by the helicopter's blades barely jostled Giovanni's short, slicked hair as he

stepped onto the rocky cliffs near the summit of the Tree of Beginning. Something warm brushed by his leg, and a quick glance down assured him that it was his ever loyal Persian.

He looked off into the distance, where the sun was just starting to peek up. It was just a sliver of light amongst the darkness. That was too bad, since he had always preferred the night over the day. The tree shape of the mountain made the landscape below him look incredibly strange, since he knew the tiers of cliffs and slopes eventually led to a very large drop.

Behind him, he heard someone stumble a bit, but paid little attention to that. The air was cool and lighter up there, and while it might bother lesser people, it had never been an issue for him.

Proton was already ordering the Grunts that came with him, and they were quickly working to install the last of the Mirage System. Once they were finished, everything would begin. He was so close, that he could basically taste victory. He wasn't one to celebrate prematurely though.

"Everything is ready, sir," Proton said to him with a bow of his head some time later.

"Excellent." Giovanni reached into the inner pocket of his black blazer and pulled out a sleek, black remote. He stared at it for a moment before looking out over the landscape and breathing in deeply.

"Are you alright, sir?" Proton asked slowly, trying not to sound worried by anything.

"This day has been a long time coming," Giovanni said. "This world is a corrupt, evil place, and soon it will become the image of perfection we have been striving towards for all these years." He thought of his mother that had been killed in silence, without any dignity, by a hypocritical league that claimed to be a shining beacon of peace. Soon everyone would see. Soon everything would be better.

He had the distinct feeling that his opponents were close by. Be it Red and the Pokémon League, or Ash Ketchum, he had a feeling something was coming his way. They couldn't surprise him, because he was expecting it.

What he wasn't expecting was a sudden blast of power from behind him. The pink energy threw some of the Grunts around, but Giovanni only stumbled a bit as Proton took most of the attack for him, hitting the ground roughly.

Giovanni was quick to catch his footing, and his Persian hissed angrily at something.

He turned around, dark eyes immediately focusing on the small creature that was floating in the air. How he would have loved to see this exact specimen years ago while in the midst of his trials to create the ultimate Pokémon. That was an old dream that was only a stepping stone towards an even greater picture.

Mew was anything but intimidating. With wide, pale blue eyes, soft pink fur, and a very small form, it looked like a living plush toy. Yet it held unfathomable power, and Giovanni could almost taste it simmering in the air. Judging from the glare on Mew's face, he was beyond unimpressed with Giovanni.

It didn't matter.

"Should we capture it?" Proton asked.

"No." Giovanni held his hand up, and his Persian actually smirked. "We destroy it." He clicked the button.

...

Surrounded by armed Team Rocket agents and their Pokémon, Lady Ilene looked up as the lights flickered and shut off. The wind began to pick up, and as her long, golden hair whipped into her face, she closed her eyes.

...

Red felt the ground shake beneath him, and looked around with hidden confusion. He could see Lance doing the same not far from him, turning to ask his cousin, Clair, if she knew what was going on.

"Red," Green whispered as she came up beside him, her wide, moss-green eyes not focused on the ground like everyone else, but up at the sky. "Look." She pointed her finger towards the sky.

Red followed her gaze, and he froze, his stomach dropping. "We need to move out, now."

...

Ash had dozed off at some point of time, so when he suddenly snapped to attention, waking Dawn up in the process, it startled both Misty and Brock to the point where Brock actually jerked the car.

"Stop!" Ash said wildly, scrambling with his seatbelt. "Stop!"

"Okay, okay! I'm stopping!" Brock managed to pull the vehicle over, but just barely, before Ash threw open the door and stumbled out.

"Ash!" Misty cried out, second to only Pikachu in rushing after him. She could hear the others asking questions as they piled out of their vehicles. "Where are you going?"

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cried out, but the second he rounded the corner that his trainer had gone around, he understood. His fur stood on end, and as he jumped up on Ash's shoulder, he hissed.

The questions on everyone's lips died when they joined their friend, lined up side by side at the cliff's edge and staring out at the Tree of Beginning that was so close yet, at that moment, so very far.

"We're too late," May breathed out in horror.

...

Giovanni looked up at as orange dots started shimmering in the air before him, slowly taking form into a massive creature with four legs that slowly took a more solid form. He heard his men shift uncomfortably, as was appropriate. This one only answered to him.

The orange outlines became a solid shape that started to fill in with colour – including pale, cloud-like fur and golden spikes. It stretched out its limbs, burning red eyes staring down at them.

Mew cringed back slightly.

"My Arceus," Giovanni said, and the Mirage Pokémon looked towards him. "Take care of Mew."

A haunted cry echoed through the air, one that seemed to make all of his underlings shiver, but Giovanni only smirk. A golden ball of energy generated above it, before launching down towards Mew.

Mew cried out in alarm and tried to avoid the attack, but was slammed backwards into the stone, shattering it and sending dust flying into the air.

Giovanni watched impassively as Mew struggled, groaning weakly as he tried to get out of the rubble. "How pathetic, he noted. "You were supposed to be the ancestor to all, but now you are nothing." He held a hand up towards Arceus. "Get rid of it."

Mirage Arceus cried out and the energy started to form again. Without warning, a golden blast of energy slammed into the false Pokémon, throwing it into the tree instead. Despite being created by the mirage system, he still splintered the rocks.

A cry that made even Giovanni shiver echoed through the air. He looked into the air before suddenly smirking.

"Arceus."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

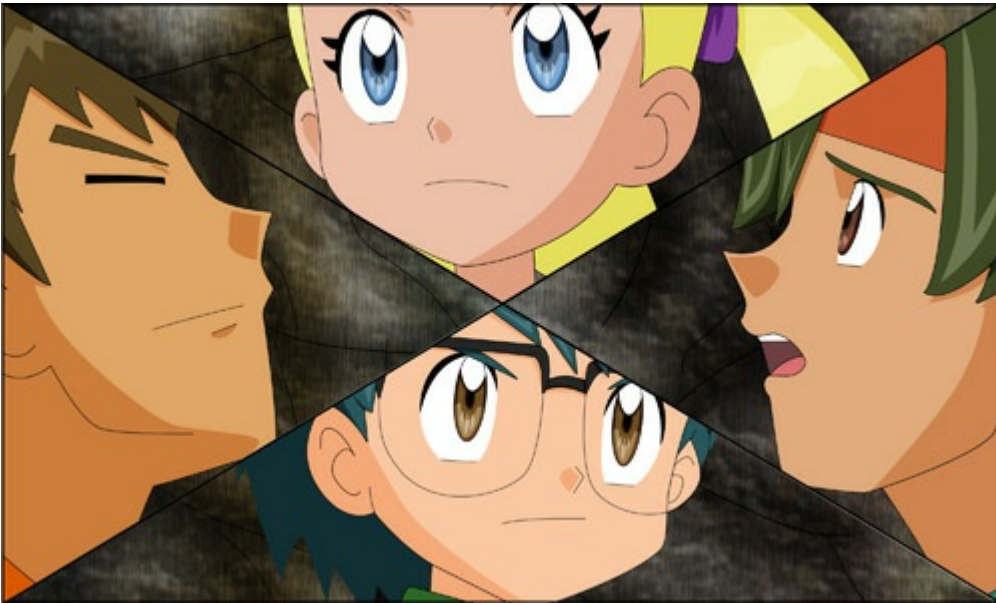
Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

The Ascent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Panic. That was the one word that could be used to describe the feeling running through everyone right now. They were all babbling, trying to talk over one another to come up with an idea to get over to the Tree of Beginning.

"So we fly!" Iris growled, stomping her foot on the ground, anger dancing across her face. "We have Druddigon, Dragonite, Hydreigon, Aerodactyl, Altaria, and Charizard! We might have to double or triple up, but most of us are light and it'll be enough!"

"Enough to get us killed," Gary argued with her, pointing a finger up into the air. "Do you not see that? That's two fucking Arceus fighting one another. Look at that!" He jabbed his finger in that direction more strongly as the two quite literally destroyed the top of a neighboring mountain. The ground shook under their feet and all of them almost fell over. "Holy fuck. The Mirage System apparently has a big fucking range so if we don't get caught in the mountains' they're exploding, we'll probably get caught by them!"

"We could get crushed driving too!" She argued back.

"We have to discount Hydreigon too," Leaf pointed out. She wanted to portray herself as calm, but couldn't stop the bit of hysteria from slipping into her voice. "He might let you ride him now, but he's not about to let anyone else on and you know that."

Iris cursed colorfully but didn't deny it.

"Using so many Pokémon is a bad idea anyway," Clemont added with a nod. "Carrying us and dodging will be exhausting – and that's if we don't get into a fight. We'll be down those Pokémon when facing Team Rocket head on."

"It'll only be worse if someone spots us and we get ambushed," Brock agreed.

"I don't hear you guys coming up with anything better!" Iris snapped.

"So we don't fly." Everyone stopped talking and looked towards Tracey, who was holding a Pokéball in his hands. "My Kadabra knows teleport. However, he needs to see both here and wherever we want to go so I'd still have to get out there. He can also only do it one at a time and may need a break in between a few."

"Charizard and Aerodactyl are probably the strongest flyers we have," Ash pointed out, ignoring his own confusion that Tracey had a Kadabra, because when had that happened? "They're the most experienced and the oldest. If anyone can make it through with a couple people and still be able to keep going, it's them." Which meant that he and Gary would have to go along with Tracey. "I can use my Aura to try and stop anything from hitting us on the way. It'll be easy with only two Pokémon if we stick close together."

Brock thought about that for a moment, before saying, "I'll go with you guys as well. I've been here before too, so if we get separated, we'll at least have someone slightly more familiar with the territory."

"Do two Pokémon have to go? Is that safe?" Misty asked, green eyes looking from one friend to the next almost anxiously.

"I think we need at least three people to go for safety. It might as well be four if we have the Pokémon available," Brock answered her thoughtfully.

That wasn't really why though. Not at all. He knew exactly what this was. This was the moment where things went from bad to the worst case scenario. These were the moments where Ash would run on his own. He wouldn't think, he'd just act and do what he could to help as many people as he could, even at his own expense. If Brock could do something to keep him in check for a little while longer, he was going to.

It would be impossible, after all, to fulfill their promise to help him get to the top (where Ash claimed he probably needed to go because of course the shrine couldn't be on the first floor – that'd be too easy) if Ash ran off on his own. He also knew there was no way he wasn't going to go.

Gary shrugged his shoulders and tossed a Pokéball up into the air. His Aerodactyl appeared right behind Ash, causing the other teenager to jump and take a few steps away, side-eyeing the Pokémon warily for a moment.

Realizing his mistake, Gary quickly apologized. "Sorry, I forgot you don't like Aerodactyl or Spearow." His Pokémon looked offended. "Not you personally."

"It's not that I don't like them," Ash assured, turning to face the Pokémon, not wanting to leave it with hurt feelings even now. "Every other time I've met one of you, they tried to eat me. And the Spearow are a long story." He tossed his own Pokéball into the air. "I know, it's stupid, all things considered."

When Charizard appeared, he gave Aerodactyl the stink-eye and not so subtly moved closer to Ash. He didn't like the Aerodactyl species all that much either.

Tracey's Kadabra was released as well. The trainer leaned down slightly and said, "Take a look around this place and try to memorize it, okay? We're going to need to teleport back and forth between here and another place enough time to get almost all our friends there, okay?"

The psychic-type eyed the area and the people, nodding his head solemnly before Tracey recalled him. The young man stood up and nodded to the others. "Alright, let's go."

"Be careful," Misty warned, squeezing Ash's hand. Her expression wasn't soft or loving, like Brock expected when he turned to look at them. Instead, she looked like she was threatening to bring Ash back from the dead and kill her himself if he did anything stupid.

Which she probably was, when he thought about it.

It was strange, climbing onto Charizard. He remembered when this Pokémon was only a Charmander that had been abandoned for being apparently too weak. Brock would love to see Damian's face if he could see the Pokémon now.

Gary helped Tracey up onto Aerodactyl, and Ash made sure that Pikachu was holding onto his shoulder tightly as the Pokémon left the ground, hovering a few inches in the air.

"Wait!" Misty blurted out suddenly, toying with the keystone around her neck. "Maybe you should —"

"Keep it," Ash insisted. He nodded towards the others. "You might need it. Charizard's fine." As if to confirm his trainer's words, Charizard huffed out tiny flames from his nose.

"We'll see you soon!" Gary assured them before the two Pokémon took off into the sky.

"We should fly low, so no one sees us coming," Tracey suggested, holding on and eyeing the landscape.

The two flying-types took off into the air, and Brock called out, "Should we stay low in hopes that no one sees us or just go high, avoiding any traps, and hope that everyone's too busy paying attention to that." He pointed at the two dueling Arceus, who took apart another mountain. He winced at the sight.

"Low!" Ash called out. Brock was right beside him and could hear him clearly, but he was yelling for Tracey and Gary's sake. "The Aura here's super strong. If there's someone hiding, I'll know. I'll be able to cover us." Charizard growled and Ash patted his neck. "Not that you need it." Aerodactyl screeched. "Yeah, yeah, you too."

Gary was confident in his Pokémon's ability to outmaneuver anything that might come their way. But when a giant piece of a cliff shattered above them, he couldn't help but flinch and wait to be crushed. Ash moved faster, keeping his promise to help them. Just like when he stopped them from being crushed underground, he managed to hold the falling boulders from squashing them until they flew by.

Gary wasn't a nervous flyer. He didn't mind heights or rather wild rides, but he felt like he was going to puke out the pathetic amount of food that he had consumed on the drive there. They had to twist and turn, and redirect themselves over and over so no one would see them or they wouldn't get caught in the fallout of two Arceus fighting one another above them.

By the time they landed by of the Tree of Beginning, all of them were annoyed and slightly motion sick. It had taken far longer than they thought. Ironically, the safest place for them to land had been under the outcropping of cliffs that gave the mountain its tree-like look, way down at the bottom where the stone roots were raised up.

"Let's never do that again," Brock groaned, fighting back a bit of nausea. There was absolutely no way that all of them would have made it over. Aerodactyl and Charizard both seemed a little tired as it was, and they were both incredibly strong Pokémon. Even slightly weaker ones wouldn't have cut it.

"I second that," Tracey agreed before grabbing Kadabra's Pokéball and releasing the Pokémon. "Take a look around and get a feel for this place. Then start teleporting them. However many you think you can take at a time, even if it's just one. Okay?"

Kadabra nodded his head solemnly and the Pokémon disappeared. Tracey and Gary both slumped to the ground to get their bearings again.

Brock, who was leaning on a boulder, looked up as Ash shifted, moving around Charizard and towards the Tree's roots, Pikachu following him every step while Charizard watched on cautiously. Both of them were well acquainted with their trainer's impulsive behavior when others were in danger as well.

Ash's fingers curled into a crack in the tall roots, and he started to hoist himself up, scaling the side with an ease that Brock thought was almost unfair. He knew that didn't have to do with Aura or being the Chosen One. Even before his powers were freed Ash had been able to climb as easily as a Mankey, a remnant from a childhood of scaling trees and other things to laugh and play, or to escape from others.

Brock eyed the roots and saw an easier way up, electing to climb up that way as he followed Ash as he heard Kadabra and Leaf appear behind him. He wasn't about to let his friend out of his sight yet.

Ash was kneeling behind an outcropping of rock, staring at the ground below them. Though there was no one directly in their vicinity, they could still see some Grunts in the distance.

"It looks like they're fighting," Brock noted.

"Cha," Pikachu agreed sternly.

"They are," Ash said, focusing on the battles that were happening away from them. An explosion made them wince, no doubt coming from a Pokémon in a last-ditch attempt to win a battle.

Brock watched as Ash's eyes slid up the tree, looking towards the top. "There are lots of people farther up but I think there's less fighting too. They didn't get up there yet. I don't—" he hesitated, "I don't feel Giovanni down here, and the Aura's too strong up there to pick out specific people." He jabbed his thumb upwards, flinching when the two Arceus attacked each other again. Brock could only imagine how powerful Arceus' Aura was to Ash, since even people with no affinity for the power could see it. It was the only way to keep track of which one was the real Arceus, and which one was the Mirage, since it didn't have that same golden glow.

That should have been a warning bell to Giovanni that his plan to replace the real Arceus with his own would never work, but since the two were still fighting, he clearly hadn't changed his mind.

"What are you guys looking at?" Brock's heart nearly jumped out of his throat with surprise. He whirled around, holding onto the rock beside him so that he wouldn't fall. Ash seemed startled too, apparently concentrating too hard on everything else to notice Misty sneaking up behind them.

"The fighting," Ash answered with a nod of his head as she knelt between the two of them.

"It's going to be hard to get through that," Brock realized, his stomach twisting uncomfortably. They were going to have to fight their way through a total warzone to get Ash up to the top. For a moment, he thought about just telling his friend to take Charizard up, but the sudden increase in altitude would make him woozy, and there was too high of a chance that Charizard would get attacked in the process.

Unfortunately for them, it was safer to go inside.

"Hey!" Iris called up to them, waving her hand. "Come down here for a minute! We found something."

Curious, and trusting that Misty wouldn't allow Ash to randomly wander off on his own, Brock led the way back down to where everyone else was. Kadabra was panting, looking completely exhausted as Tracey thanked him and called him back.

Charizard nudged Ash with his muzzle, and the black-haired boy rubbed the Pokémon's neck.

"Look at this," Leaf said, inching closer to the Tree of Beginning. Brock blinked with surprise when she managed to squeeze herself into a crevice that he hadn't noticed in his brief overview of the spot they landed in. Leaf leaned her head back out and looked at them. "It opens up to a bigger cavern. We might be able to use this to avoid anyone for a while."

"Like going in through the basement!" Bonnie exclaimed, clapping her hands together once excitedly.

Leaf nodded her head and looked towards Ash, Brock, and Misty. "Unless there's a better option over where you were looking?"

"No, just a lot of fighting." Ash's relief wasn't lost on anyone, and Brock was reminded about the stories he was told, and the things his friend had very reluctantly told him or alluded to. It didn't surprise him at all that Ash wanted to avoid a fight as long as he possibly could.

It was an easy fit for Bonnie and Max to get through. Dawn and Iris, both being rather petite, were able to get into the cavern with little trouble. May and Misty had the same trouble that Leaf had, having to uncomfortably squash their chests against the rocks. Clemont and Gary managed to get through just fine, though Ash struggled a little bit.

Everyone inside must have found it amusing to try and get Cilan, Tracey, and Brock through. Cilan and Tracey's problems were their height, having to lean down really awkwardly, while Brock's was both his height and being just a little too big.

It took Ash's Greninja giving him a swift kick through the crevice to get through. It wasn't his most dignified moment.

The cavern would have been almost pitch black if it wasn't for the dim light coming in from the opening, and the glowing greenish-blue crystals scattered throughout it.

"They're not orange," Max noted, and Bonnie raised an eyebrow at him. He pointed at one of them. "The last time we were here, the Tree's defense system – almost like an immune system – kicked in and the crystals started glowing orange. That's when these blob-things, antibodies really, started attacking us. It's not orange, so we're safe from those for now."

"Isn't the Mirage System's energy generally generated as orange?" Clemont asked suddenly, his brow furrowing. They had talked about it possibly being the same energy before, but this really seemed to confirm it even more for him.

"That's right," Brock agreed before pointing upward. "And that looks like a way out to somewhere." It was hard to see in the eerie light, but there was indeed another opening up a steep slope.

"Let's get moving," Gary encouraged. Even though none of them truly wanted to, they all set

forward together.

...

Giovanni watched the sky in awe. His Arceus, his wonderful, amazing Arceus, was holding its own against the real thing with ease and grace. It was true, he didn't seem to be overpowering the real one yet, but that didn't matter. After all, mirage couldn't get tired, but the real thing could.

Other men might have fled from the scene to avoid the rippling shockwaves, blinding lights, and piercing sounds, but not him. He was utterly enthralled.

"Sir!" Proton yelled, interrupting his thoughts and taking his attention away from the fight. His underling looked nervous, eyes darting to the Pokémon. "We've got word that Champion Lance and the G-Men have infiltrated the lower levels of the Tree. There have been no reports of Master Red yet."

Giovanni regarded him thoughtfully. "Go down and assess the situation. Report back to me when you have done so."

"Yes sir!" He yelled something unimportant at a few Grunts, and they all ran back into the cavern together.

"You're going to lose," a soft, child-like voice scolded. Giovanni looked over his shoulder at the prone form of Mew, who was starting to get back up. "They'll stop you."

"I doubt it, but you won't live to see it either way." He looked at his Persian and snapped his fingers. "Kill it."

Persian's eye flashed towards Mew, hungry for bloodshed and battle. The Pokémon growled viciously and launched itself into the air. Mew was too injured to use his psychic powers to move, too injured to physically move, so he simply closed his eyes and waited.

Persian yowled as he stopped mid-air, and Giovanni looked from the battling Arceus back to him. His Pokémon was surrounded by a purple glow, hovering in the air despite his struggling.

Then he was thrown into the stone wall and knocked out with ease.

"You will not take the lives of any more Legendary Pokémon," a deep voice spoke, a seething anger just below the surface. A tall, cat-like creature with white and purple fur stepped between him and Mew. "Not anymore."

His own memories did not recall this creature, but reports, and a few videos, did. Giovanni knew exactly what he was looking at right now.

"Mewtwo."

...

Red huffed as he leaned against the stone wall. Sweat dotted his forehead, and though he stubbornly kept pushing forward, he knew that he should have stayed back, that he could very well end up as a liability rather than an asset.

Then he pictured his Misty's light green eyes (lighter than Ash's Misty) staring at him with disappointment. He pictured sweet Daisy Oak winking when he had a massive crush on her as a young child.

He saw Blue glaring at him for even thinking about giving up.

"Are you okay?"

Red jumped, looking over his shoulder as Green came to a stop beside him. He inhaled with relief. "This is all really...surreal."

"You were a captive," she noted. "You weren't living this like the rest of us were." He had been lost to his own hell instead. "We'll be okay if you go back."

"No. There's no going back now."

Green pursed her lips. "Fine. We'll stick together instead. Let's try to clear the road before our kids gets here."

Red nodded his head. That was something he agreed with wholeheartedly at this point.

...

It was incredibly eerie, knowing that there was a vicious battle going on around them, but everything was completely calm and still. Everyone was completely on edge as they walked through the tunnels that slowly sloped upwards, leaning from one cavern to the next. The glowing crystals that grew visibly brighter when Ash neared them guided their way.

"You know," Leaf spoke up slowly, "all this time we've been saying that something's manipulating us along."

"Which is probably true," Gary pointed out.

"Well, yeah. No way things worked out that well for us – all things considered. But right now, I was thinking, there's no one something that could have manipulated us to get to this spot as it is. Sure, something teleported us to Cerulean, but even since then, I don't know, I just felt like..."

"We were suddenly completely on our own," Clemont finished for her. "Honestly, I felt the same way too. I just didn't want to say anything." It was clear why he made that choice. Clemont was a man of science through and through, and wouldn't have wanted to speculate on a simple feeling like that.

"So it probably was genuine luck that we found this entrance?" Serena asked, raising an eyebrow slightly.

"Who knows. Maybe." Leaf shrugged. "It was just a feeling." She turned her head slightly. "What do you think, Ash?"

Ash opened his mouth to say something, but his eyes suddenly darted towards the wall behind her. "Get down!" In the time it took to yell, he had already bounded across the tunnel to her, tackling her to the ground. Pikachu cried out in alarm at his trainer's sudden movements, holding onto his shoulder, and then onto his jacket as Ash threw him below his body too. The rock wall that Leaf had been standing in front of exploded inwards as a massive Machop was thrown into the tunnel. It groaned in pain but then jumped up and rushed out the new doorway again.

"Holy shit!"

"Bonnie!" Clemont and Serena yelled in horror.

"What the—hey! There are a group of kids trying to sneak in over here!"

"So much for our secret tunnel," Misty groaned. A second later she screamed as a Golem slammed through the wall just beside where the first hole was, the flying rocks blocking off their exit. Misty's eyes turned to the battle raging between G-Men and Grunts in the room beyond them. Her stomach sank when she realized that they had no choice but to go through it at this point.

The Golem turned to her, but was thrown backwards by a barrage of leaves. She looked behind her and saw Leaf's Venusaur standing ready for battle.

"Don't fight!" Gary exclaimed, startling them all. He pointed above them. "Look! There's an exit up there. We just need to run around the ledges to get up there." He looked at everyone else. "We need to keep our Pokémon's strength."

They nodded in agreement and Leaf recalled Venusaur. With quick glances at one another, the group bolted out of the relative safety of their now dead-end tunnel, trying to stay on the outskirts of the battles happening around them.

They were almost there when a blast of green energy slammed into the wall in front of them. They only avoid being hit by the exploding rocks and dirt by a hastily thrown up Aura Shield.

"So, you do have some strange magic powers, don't you?"

Turning around, a woman with dark red hair approached them, the Vileplume that used Solar Beam to stop them beside her. She eyed them all almost hungrily. "Giovanni will reward me greatly for bringing you to him."

"Ariana," Tracey whispered quickly. "She was in the files as one of Team Rocket's top admins." His voice was nervous and tense.

Ash's eyes narrowed at the woman, and his hand went to one of his Pokéballs. If he noticed that Pikachu wasn't ready to attack for once, he made no mention of it. Ash was about to throw the Pokéball when Leaf stepped up beside him, grabbing his hand and the Pokéball.

"Leaf?" he asked.

"Run," she said sternly, looking back at Misty.

Ash blinked with confusion, and Misty looked like she had swallowed something particularly unpleasant.

Reality was, they didn't have time to battle every person they came across. Or at least, Ash didn't. He wasn't the type to back down and let his friends do the work though. Which was why they'd have to make him leave.

With a frustrated groan, Misty grabbed Ash's arm and started running. He protested loudly, but May shoved him from behind to keep going.

Ariana moved to follow them, but Leaf got in her path again.

"I don't think so," the teenager said, dusty-brown eyes flashing darkly. "You want him, you have to go through me first."

Ariana eyed her before laughing loudly. "Oh, I've seen this before. You're just like your mother, aren't you? Willing to fight and let your version of Red take the glory. You certainly look like

you're as weak as she is."

Leaf felt her blood boiling in her veins. Her chapped lips rose into a smirk. She took out all five of her Pokéballs – still missing Beartic's – and tossed them into the air. Venusaur, Espeon, Ditto, Spiritomb, and Houndoom appeared in front of her.

"Not even close."

...

Gary felt a stabbing pain in his chest, and that confused him a lot. Though they could have had more food and water recently, he was in pretty good shape, and he definitely didn't have any heart conditions at this point in his life. So why was it hurting so much as they were running?

His viridian eyes slipped to Ash, who was still protesting audibly, despite the fact that he wasn't physically struggling against Misty's grip as she urged him onward. When Ash turned slightly to glance behind him, Gary caught his eye. It was brief, but still enough to recognize that there was pain there. Perhaps the same pain he was feeling.

That's when it hit him. It was guilt that he saw in Ash Ketchum's eyes. The guilt that they were leaving Leaf behind to fight a dangerous enemy on her own. Gary felt it too.

He looked over his shoulder again, and the pain hit him harder, forcing him to realize that it wasn't just guilt. No, there was something else, a feeling that seemed to echo from the past when he was much younger and pushed all of his friends away with cruelty.

It was heartache. He felt like little pieces were being ripped from it, all from leaving Leaf behind. He felt like a horrible friend, a horrible something more. Gary didn't like this feeling at all, and briefly wondered how people dealt with it, because he had no idea what to do.

Dawn screamed and almost tripped as an enemy Sandslash launched out of the ground. Gary grabbed her by her bicep and pulled her back out of the way.

"Thanks," she gasped.

"No problem." His eyes darted around, his mind quickly combing over the numbers of enemies, and his heart sank.

There were too many of them. No matter how strong their Pokémon were, if they could be outnumbered, they could be taken down.

His eyes glazed over the ceiling, but snapped back when he saw the massive crystals that were clinging close to a ledge just above them. He then glanced at his friends. Then looked behind him.

Wetting his lips, Gary suddenly came to a stop.

"What are you doing?" Dawn called out to him, the only one that noticed him stop.

"Keep going! I've got an idea that might slow them down! I'll catch up!" Gary heard Dawn hesitate before she kept running after everyone else. He turned to face the oncoming enemies.

For so long, Gary Oak had been all talk. Sure, he had always been a strong trainer, and he had really started to help and care for Pokémon later on, but he had always acted like he was someone who could lead them, someone who could lay his life on the line when others needed him.

Words didn't mean much alone, so it was time to put his actions where his words are.

He threw his Pokéballs into air, releasing Blastoise, Umbreon, Aerodactyl, Arcanine, Nidoking, and Electivire. "Aerodactyl, Blastoise, I need you. Everyone else," he paused and glared at the Grunts that were heading towards him with their Pokémon, "give them hell."

...

"Where are Gary and Dawn?" Those words made Tracey stop and look around with surprise. Part of the agreement had been to keep Dawn with Ash as long as possible. She was his sister – his real sister – and they doubted that he was going to be okay with her staying behind until it was absolutely necessary.

Before anyone could answer, Dawn came charging through the tunnel, slamming into Iris and causing both of them to tumble to the floor.

"Sorry," she gasped, wincing a bit as she put weight on the palms of her hands.

"It's okay. Where's Gary?" Iris asked as she helped her up.

"He stayed behind. He had a plan to stop them from following us," Dawn explained.

Ash's eyes darted to the tunnel behind them, and Misty squeezed his arm tightly, digging her heels into the ground to steady herself if he tried to run back after his friend.

"End of the line for you punks!" They looked up as a group of Grunts approached them from the front. Seriously, how many of these guys were there?

They didn't look that tough. The problem was that these ones were armed with firearms as well as Pokéballs. That was enough to make anyone hesitate.

"That's right, stay good and still. Don't do anything stupid and we won't hurt you," a woman said, a bit of a sly purr to her voice. Tracey stared at her, a bubble of annoyance rising up in him. They didn't have time for this anymore.

"You know...you look familiar..." the man eyed Misty, eyes sliding up and down. Ash glared at him fiercely. The man snapped his fingers a moment later. "You're one of those Cerulean Floozies, aren't you? Thought we drowned all of you in the tsunami."

Misty's lips thinned into a straight line as her fist clenched so hard that it turned her knuckles a milky white. She wanted to punch this man in the face with every fiber of her being.

The sound of a fist hitting skin was very satisfying. The only problem was that she didn't do it. Misty blinked with surprised and followed the fist up an arm with a long-sleeved burgundy shirt, up to the teal t-shirt and then to the angry brown eyes on the man's face.

Tracey had just punched him in the face.

Even Tracey was surprised with himself. He hadn't really felt himself move at all. The second the man brought up Misty's sisters and drowning, he had just snapped and moved without realizing it.

There was one thing Tracey knew for sure. He could feel it thumping inside of him. This was his fight.

He threw a Pokéball into the air, and a strange creature with a long tail that had a sea-green tip on

the end appeared. Tracey straightened his shoulders and called out, "Smeargle, use Double Team!" More and more of the Pokémon appeared around them.

"This is my fight," he insisted. "You all keep running!"

"What? You're not a fighter!" Ash blurted out. Tracey knew he didn't mean it to be offensive, because Tracey wasn't really much of a fighter, but it still annoyed him.

"I'll be fine. I've got a few more tricks up my sleeve." He threw his other Pokéballs, releasing Azumarill, Venomoth, his old Scyther, a Dodrio, and his Kadabra. They all quickly blended in and mingled with his apparent army of Smeargle.

"They gave guns," May whimpered.

"It'll be okay. Just go."

No one felt right about running this time, but Tracey was glad that they left. Even if this was where his life was going to end, he wasn't about to let it end with him running away and hiding while others fought.

"Agility!" Tracey yelled. They didn't have to beat every Grunt, but if they could get the firearms away from them, they truly stood a good chance in winning. That was exactly what he planned on doing.

...

"Stop it!" Ash yelled, jerking his arm away from Misty's grip, which had left a red mark on his tanned skin. He stumbled back into a wall, brown eyes blazing with accusation. "You're doing this on purpose! You planned this, didn't you?"

Standing in an empty tunnel with nothing but sharp rocks and crystals around them – the sounds of battle in the distance - Brock, Misty, May, Max, Dawn, Iris, Cilan, Serena, Clemont, and Bonnie all exchanged nervous glances, watching as Ash's arms shook.

"I can't—why?" he choked out, visibly upset.

"We don't need to be there for the orbs to work," Cilan spoke up when no one else would. "You do."

"I—what—I—we can't!" He threw his arms into the air angrily, the crystals around him flashing brighter with the movement. "We need to stick together!"

Misty wanted to hug him when his voice cracked. Ash genuinely sounded like he was about to cry. Misty was sure that he'd just push her away though.

"Pikapi," Pikachu spoke softly from his shoulders, ears flat against his head. "Pikachu pi ka chu pika pika."

"You knew too?" That seemed to hurt him even more than everyone else. He looked towards Misty helplessly. "We need to stick together. You said it before. We all work better together. I work better with all of you."

Misty opened her mouth to speak, but she didn't know what to say. Instead, Brock took a step forward and put his hand on Ash's arm. "Yeah, you've always needed others, and that's why we're getting you to where you need to be. That's your destiny you chose to embrace. The one we chose

was to do this. You always say you want choices, so please, respect ours too."

Ash's face faltered, and he quickly looked away, tilting his head so that the brim of his hat was hiding his eyes as he gritted his teeth together.

Max eyed his older friend solemnly. He had always admired Ash, well, at least he had once he had gotten over being super critical about him. This was one of the reasons why. The world was potentially about to end, and his friends still mattered so much to him.

His musings were cut short when he noticed something odd. The glow of the crystals was slowly changing, becoming more and more green until they started to fade into yellow, then burning a bright orange.

His stomach dropped.

"We need to get out of here!" It came out as much more of a squeak than he meant to.

Bonnie looked at him, concern crossing her face. "What's wrong?"

He pointed at the crystals. "They're orange."

That seemed to snap everyone to their senses. Dawn, Iris, Cilan, Serena, Clemont, and Bonnie looked properly confused at the brief description. Brock, May, Misty, and Ash, suddenly looked horrified.

"We need to run," Brock whispered before raising his voice loudly. "Now!"

That sprang everyone into action, even those who hadn't actually seen what happens when the crystals start glowing orange.

In the back of his mind, Max was suddenly young again, being dragged along behind his sister in the exact same tunnel from years before. They hadn't really planned for this, though it had come up briefly. Of course the Tree would start defending itself from Team Rocket at the very least. It had reacted to Kidd's technology years ago, and they were a lot worse.

Someone screamed, it might have been one of the girls, it might have been him, he didn't know, as an orange Omastar suddenly launched out of nowhere. Clemont pulled Bonnie around it as they ran.

The narrow tunnel made Max feel terribly claustrophobic as they struggled through it. He prayed to find another cavern soon, and those prayers were soon answered. He almost stumbled into Serena when he realized that they were in a spot with a bunch of small ledges with small breaks between them that led to a very steep drop. He remembered this place.

"Come on!" Ash yelled, suddenly all too willing to keep going if it meant protecting the friends that were left. He was the one that led the way across the ledges, not hesitating a bit no matter how close to the edge he got.

Getting across wasn't as hazardous or nerve wracking as Max remembered. Once they were on the other side, running through the tunnels, the orange blob-creatures that would occasionally throw themselves at them were though. There weren't nearly as many as he remembered from when they were younger, but perhaps that was because there were many more people around.

Max could only hope that one had already gotten Giovanni, but in reality, he knew that they'd never be so lucky.

He faltered when they entered a new cavern and almost toppled over his own feet in the process. Max knew this place, and from the looks on Misty, Brock, and May's faces, they did as well.

"This is the place everyone disappeared," Misty whispered, her voice tight. That moment had felt like a personal failure for her even back then.

"Come on," Brock urged them, wanting to be out of the room as quickly as possible. He could still feel the prickle of pain dancing along his skin, and didn't want to experience it again.

Max yelled loudly as the cavern started to shake, the ground underneath his feet cracking and shifting. His arms wheeled wildly, and he fell backwards, slamming into the ground painfully and rolling down the part of the ground that had collapsed to form a hazardous slide. He groaned as he hit a rock, but at least it stopped him from going farther.

May's scream still echoed around the cavern. She moved before anyone could stop her, practically launching herself after her brother, and glad that she had jeans on rather than the shorts she normally preferred as she skidded down the rough rock slope.

"Max! Are you okay?"

He groaned and opened his eyes again, blinking at his sister. "Why are there two of you?" He sounded appalled by the idea, and May barked out a laugh until she saw him wince.

"What's wrong?"

He tried to move his foot and winced. Casting a glance down at it, he realized that it was trapped, though it didn't feel broken entirely. "I'm stuck."

"May! Max! Are you alright?" Brock yelled down to them.

"Max is stuck!" May yelled back up. Her eyes widened when she saw Brock prepare to come down after them, and yelled again, "No! Keep going! I'll get him out and we'll catch up, promise!"

Brock hesitated before slowly nodding his head. He said something to someone behind him that May couldn't see, probably Ash, and then they all disappeared from view.

Her stomach clenched at the thought of everyone else leaving, but they had a mission and she had to help her brother. Turning back around, May reached for the rocks.

Something cracked behind her.

Brother and sister looked up in time to see the twisting, glowing arm of one of the orange blobs trying to push aside a rock.

May's breath caught in her throat, and panic erupted in her. She threw her Pokéballs into the air, releasing Blaziken, Beautifly, Snorlax, Glaceon, Altaria, and a Chatot. "Keep it out of here!" They nodded and rushed towards the blocked tunnel, even Snorlax.

Six flashes of light drew her attention back to her brother, and she found his Treecko, Mightyena, Kirlia, Shuppet, Dunsparce, and Shuckle standing around him.

"Help me get this rock off, and get ready to fight," he said sternly. There was nowhere they could run from this thing, not even on Altaria. They'd have to find a way to defeat it, even if there didn't seem to be one the first time.

It was the only way that they were going to survive.

...

Iris took pride in the fact that she was an athletic girl and in great shape. She could run, jump, scale trees, and swing from vines better than most people. Despite this fact, she could feel her legs burning and her lungs struggling to get enough air. They were getting higher up a little too rapidly, and with the air getting lighter, it was starting to impact everyone.

"We need to stop," she gasped, finally unable to go any further. Like her words were the relief that they needed, Clemont, Bonnie, Serena, Dawn, and Cilan fell to their knees on the ground, all panting. The only ones that stayed up with Iris, Ash, Misty, and Brock. Still, Iris was panting and felt sweat at the edge of her brow. A quick glance around told her that Misty and Brock were in the same state.

She scowled a bit at Ash, who was breathing a little more heavily than normal, but that was is. "What the hell, why aren't you tired?"

He blinked at her and shrugged. "I've been using my Aura to move myself around easier. Jumping, running faster – I'm pretty much pushing myself along a little bit."

"How is that fair? Wait, does that mean in theory you could keep throwing yourself up to the top faster?" Why was he hanging back with them if that was the case? Iris realized that was a stupid question. Ash was already protesting leaving them.

Surprising her, he sent her a dry look. "I would probably miss and plummet off the cliff. I can't control it that much mid-air."

Iris was about to respond to that when they heard a crash coming from the direction they were heading in. She groaned and looked around as two women came into view. Both of them seemed rather surprised to see people that high up in the Tree.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" A woman with blonde hair that puffed out in wild curls said, putting a hand on her hip as a smirk played on her lips. "Looks like we get to have some fun after all, don't we, Oakley?"

The woman with pale blue hair that flipped out at the ends grinned. "Yes we do."

"Annie and Oakley," Brock whispered quickly. "We met them before, on Alto Mare." No one bothered to question why he knew this off-hand. A scowl appeared on Ash's face. He clearly remembered them too.

"Really?" Iris burst out, surprising them all. "Where do you jerks keep coming from? I'm an athletic person, and I'm sick and tired of climbing this stupid mountain and you aren't making it any easier."

"Iris," Cilan hissed.

Casting a glance over her shoulder, Iris saw the worry in Cilan's clear green eyes. She knew that he knew what she was about to do. Iris smiled at him confidently and turned around, balancing her Pokéballs between her fingers. "But you know, maybe you're right. Maybe we can have some fun." She tossed a Pokéball high into the air, and with a roar that shook the tunnel, Hydreigon, Druddigon, Haxorus, Dragonite, Emolga, and Excadrill appeared. "I can take on both of you myself."

"Iris!" Serena sounded both worried and scandalized.

Iris winked at her over her shoulder and then yelled, "Excadrill, let's make some room for everyone else!"

Her Pokémon launched himself at the floor, digging underneath it and throwing Annie and Oakley to the floor. Iris turned to everyone else. "Go! I got this!"

Maybe it was the fact that most of her team were large dragons (actually, most definitely because most of her team were large dragons), everyone seemed a little more willing to leave. Iris was glad. She didn't want to hear their worried shouts or wishes of good luck. She just wanted to end this.

As Annie and Oakley stood up, her eyes narrowed and her dragons shifted around her. She wasn't going to let anyone hurt anyone else anymore.

...

"Enough of this!" Giovanni was seething as his Kangaskhan fell to the ground in a defeated heap. Mewtwo hovered over the Pokémon victoriously, but Giovanni did not recall it. If the pathetic creature couldn't defeat a mere clone, it wasn't worth much. The same could be said of the other Pokémon. Yes, he knew that Mewtwo was designed to be the strongest Pokémon in the world, barring Arceus, but he didn't seem tired in the least, and he was also protecting the pathetic Mew the entire time!

"Sir!" Someone yelled from behind him. "The G-Men are getting really far up the tunnels! What should we do?"

Giovanni's eye met Mewtwo's, and he knew. "Activate them. I want the Mewtwo here."

Mewtwo blinked at him, and a moment later, the Mirage System came to life once again. Giovanni had the controls for Arceus directly, but they all bowed down to him. Even the Mewtwo that appeared in a flash of orange light.

"Destroy them!"

...

Run. Climb. Slip. Get back up. Try to rest for a moment. Run into enemies. Escape them. Rinse and repeat. From the moment they left Iris behind, this repetitive pattern became starkly obvious to Clemont. It was tiring, dizzying, and overall ridiculous, but they had to keep going. Round and around they seemed to be running, up dangerous ledges, through outdoor hills that were sickeningly high.

Honestly, he was amazed that he had made it so far.

They hurried around another corner just as a flash of orange light engulfed them. Clemont winced, a blue shadow of the light dancing across his eyes, temporarily blinding him. He heard Ash yelp with alarm, Pikachu's angry yell, and a crash of electricity and rock meeting violently.

Then they all hit the floor and slid on the uneven ground.

Clemont winced when he felt a crystal dig into his hand. He blinked his eyes several times, trying to regain his vision properly, and grimaced at the crack in his glasses.

Then he saw what it was that attacked them, and his stomach dropped. Looming above them was a

powerful Zygarde, an odd glow to its body. It didn't take much to hypothesize that it was a Mirage Pokémon.

Clemont looked around quickly. Cilan wasn't far from him, blinking his eyes in confusion over what just happened. Ash was holding Pikachu close and checking if he was okay. Whatever happened had apparently thrown the Pokémon across the room. Brock was kneeling a little ways away from him, an arm around Dawn to protect her. Misty and Serena were side by side, helping each other to get off the ground.

Cilan managed to focus on the situation, and gasped. "Bonnie!"

Clemont's head snapped around, and his heart stopped beating when he saw Bonnie clear across the other side of the cavern from them. She pushed herself up, staring directly at the Mirage Zygarde that hovered over her as she held an unconscious Dedenne to her chest.

The Pokémon reared back, and Clemont moved before he even realized he was going to. He heard shouts of alarm from behind him, and if he were actually thinking, he would have realized that Ash probably could have saved Bonnie (though he would also remember that the orange, negative energy that seemed to be Aura's opposite always messed with it a bit). He wasn't thinking, he was just moving.

Bonnie felt Clemont's arms wrap around her, and they were thrown across the room again, Clemont taking the brunt of the hit first by the Pokémon, and then against the rock wall. Bonnie heard herself scream as she pulled herself from under his limp form.

She glanced at Dedenne in her arms, and quickly went for her brother's pouch. She could help the little Pokémon right now at the very least. Bonnie found the Pokéball that belonged to Dedenne (she couldn't carry it herself yet) and recalled the Pokémon, quickly tucking the ball safely in Clemont's pouch.

She then turned her attention to her brother, eyes darting over his prone figure as panic welled up in her. She might have been young, but she knew not to move someone who was hurt. The bit of blood she could see showing through his shirt (it wasn't bad enough to go through his overalls though) only made her panic more. Tears welled in the young girl's eyes. "Get up! Clemont! Please! You're not—you're not allowed to leave me too!" She choked out the last words. "Brother!"

A shadow loomed over them.

Bonnie looked up, and blinked her tears away as anger replaced it. She glared at Mirage Zygarde, and screamed, "Go away!"

Mirage Zygarde launched itself towards her, and the ground around the Liscio siblings exploded. The flying rocks didn't reach them, bouncing harmlessly off of a shield that Bonnie couldn't see, but was sure Ash was controlling. When the dust settled, Bonnie saw the Mirage Pokémon twitching on the ground, and in front of her, without that weird glow, was another Zygarde.

Her breath caught in her throat as the Pokémon looked at her. She had never met a Zygarde before, but she knew this creature, she was sure of it.

Zygarde looked towards Ash and everyone else, growling at them. Bonnie knew it was telling them to go, and oddly enough, she didn't feel nervous at all anymore. She knew that they'd be okay.

Standing up again, she stood in front of her brother protectively and glared fiercely at the Mirage Zygarde that was once again standing before them. "I'm not afraid of you, and I won't let you hurt

anyone else! Let's get him, Squishy!" She didn't even consciously realize the name she just said, but Bonnie knew that it was right.

The real Zygarde roared in confirmation and rushed forward to attack.

...

Cilan had never realized how colorful Misty's vocabulary was as they dashed up the mountain as best as they could. She seemed to curse with every second step, and everything about her posture and expression screamed how annoyed she was.

An orange figure jumped at them. It was thrown clear off the cliff by a burst of Aura. Ash was clearly at the end of his patience too.

Then again, leaving a little girl to defend her injured brother wasn't ideal in any situation.

Something out of the corner of his eye caught Cilan's attention, and he skidded to a stop, nearly causing Serena to slam into him. He grabbed her arms to steady her, and before she could ask, he nodded his head. "Over there."

Serena looked around, frowning at what she saw. There was a Rocket Grunt, well, maybe not a Grunt judging by his uniform, staring at a device in his hands.

"That's one of the controllers for the Mirage System," Brock noted. "Lance managed to get a few pictures of them."

"Do you think he's controlling that Zygarde?" Dawn asked.

"The better question is can he just bring it back if the real Zygarde defeats it?" Misty responded.

Cilan's eyes narrowed and he knew that they were all thinking the same thing. This person hadn't noticed them, they could keep running, but he could very well endanger Clemont and Bonnie even more.

"Go." Cilan spoke sternly, startling everyone. "I can deal with him."

"Cilan..." Ash said uncertainly, and Pikachu's ears fell slightly.

"No, you keep going. You forget, I'm not only a Connoisseur, but I'm a Gym Leader too." His fingers curled around his Pokéballs. "Trust me."

Ash stared at him uncertainly, but Cilan felt something inside of him lift when the teenager nodded his head. That trust and confidence could go such a long way.

"Cilan?" He looked towards Misty, who took a step towards him. She eyed him sternly. "Be careful. We need to get you back to your brothers in one piece."

He kind of wanted to hug her. Misty understood what it was like to not know what happened to your family, yet while hers had perished, she still had absolute faith that his was still alive. That meant a lot to him. It gave him a boost of confidence because she was absolutely right. He needed to do Cress and Chili proud.

Cilan watched the others start to run, before carefully unleashing Simisage, Crustle, Stunfisk, Audino, Ferrothorn, and Lilligant. "See that guy?" He pointed at the man. "We need to destroy that thing he has in his hands, and maybe knock him out while we're at it. Think we can do it?" They all

nodded in agreement. "Alright, let's go. Quietly."

The group of seven managed to slink closer to the man, close enough to hear him finish a conversation over his communication equipment. "Right. You know what you have to do. Archer, out."

"Archer, huh?" Cilan licked his lips and narrowed his eyes. "He has the bitter taste of anger, defeat, and failure to him. Let's go!"

With that, they all jumped.

...

This was an absolute nightmare. Though she had known the plan that they had, the agreement that someone would stay behind to face challenges while everyone else kept going with Ash (in Misty's case, physically wrangling Ash up the mountain when he was disagreeable with their plan), Dawn hadn't actually thought it would happen.

Sure, a part of her thought that one or two people would stay back to fight. People like Leaf and Gary with their powerful Pokémon and quick wits. She never expected the entire group to fall to pieces one at a time.

She didn't understand Giovanni's plan. It must have been years in the making – creating the Mirage Pokémon and causing specifically planned chaos all over the regions, only for it to end in wild, unplanned chaos.

Of course, Dawn also realized that Giovanni had never factored them into his plan. The Tree of Beginning hadn't been on his radar as far as they knew until he had overheard their destination via the bug in her hat. He was responding to them, and that already made part of his plan that she was sure no one but him knew the full extent of, fall apart. Dawn felt a little proud about that.

She also felt completely exhausted. Her hands throbbed painfully, and she was feeling far too hot, even though the air that high up was actually rather cold. Sweat slipped down the side of her cheek, and it was only pure stubbornness that kept her going.

Or it was, until she suddenly fell to her knees.

"Dawn!" She blinked and looked up as Ash knelt in front of her, Pikachu mirroring his worried expression. "Are you okay?"

"Peachy." Well that came out more bitter than she meant for it to. She shook her head. "I'm just tired. I'm okay." Her shoulders slumped, and it was obvious that she was lying. Dawn glared as he raised a skeptical eyebrow at her. "Don't give me that look!" She carefully put her hand on his shoulder, holding onto him gingerly as she pushed herself back up with her legs. Dawn didn't want to hurt her hands again. "Let's keep going before those weird blob-things come and get us."

"We can stop for a minute," Brock assured her, just as worried as Ash. He looked over at Misty and Serena. "Right, guys?"

Dawn looked at the two older girls and her stomach sunk. They started with a group of fourteen and there were only five of them left.

She pushed that thought away. As much as Dawn wanted to rest, the stillness was making her mind drift to places she did not want it to drift. Instead, she plastered a confident smile on her face and shook her head again. "No need to worry! We're so close to the top! Let's keep going!" She pointed

up, realizing that she wasn't actually wrong. All things considered, they were pretty close to the top.

Deciding that she didn't like the skeptical looks everyone (including Pikachu) shot her, Dawn spun around and started running ahead. She'd probably regret it when her legs burned painfully later on, but she wanted to prove that just because she had been injured badly, it didn't mean that she was down and out.

Dawn ran around a corner, and a shocked scream escaped her lips as she collided with another person. Her stomach leapt to her throat as both of them rolled off the side of the cliff, slamming down into one of the tiered cliffs that were littered with trees below. It wasn't a bad fall, but it still shocked her.

"Dawn!" She could hear the mingled screams of her friends and Pikachu from above.

She blinked open her eyes and looked at who it was she had fallen down with. The young girl stopped breathing for a split second when she saw a bright red R on his outfit, and she quickly leapt away from him, taking several steps back.

The man groaned and pushed himself up, shooting a glare at her that melted into surprise before shifting into an unnerving grin. "Well, well, you're Red's girl. The boss would love to have you back."

Dawn's eyes narrowed. "Like I'd go anywhere with you." Her hand drifted to Piplup's Pokéball.

"Now, now, we can do this the easy way, or the hard way." She glared at him and he sighed. "The hard way it is."

Dawn's eyes flickered to the cliff beside her when she saw a flash of orange light. The brief second was enough for him to pull out a controller, and her stomach dropped again. She took a few steps back, but it was too late. There was a bright flash, the orange light taking shape in a familiar silhouette that filled out to become a very familiar Pokémon.

"Darkrai," Dawn muttered. For a brief moment, she thought about her friends coming to save her, but visibly scowled at the thought. She may have been the youngest one left, she may be Ash's biological half-sister, but she was not going to be the weak link.

Instead of just Piplup's Pokéball, she threw all of them in the air. "Piplup! Lopunny! Pachirisu! Mamoswine! Bellossom! Zorua!" The Pokémon surrounded her protectively, all glaring at the man and the false Pokémon.

Dawn perked up a bit when she heard someone yell her name. She looked upwards and saw Misty and Serena struggling to keep Ash still while Brock watched her with worry.

"Go!" Dawn yelled up at them. She didn't want to be separated, but she knew this was how it had to be. This was her fight. "I'll be fine! Go!" She glared directly at Ash. "You want to be my big brother? Then save the freaking world or there won't be one for any of us to live in!" She turned her attention back to the problem at hand.

"You're brave, I'll tell you that," the man said. "The name's Petral. You won't be forgetting it anytime soon. Darkrai!"

The Mirage Darkrai created a large, glowing ball in his hands and threw it at them. Dawn winced, unable to think of a command so quickly, but it didn't matter since a second Shadow Ball slammed into the first one, and both collided with the ground, sending dust into the sky.

Dawn coughed and wave the dirt out from in front of her. When it finally settled down, her mouth fell open in surprise at what she saw. The Pokémon that was supposed to be guarding New Moon Island's orb, but hadn't been.

Darkrai.

He looked over his shoulder at her and nodded in acknowledgment. Dawn felt the warmth of determination rush through her. They could win this time, she knew they could.

...

Dawn's words about Ash being her big brother and needing to save the world were enough to make him stop actively struggling, but he only willingly went along with Misty and Serena's tugs when Darkrai appeared.

The Mirage Darkrai might have been made to be stronger than a natural one, but if that was the Alpha Darkrai, there was a chance Yung hadn't prepared for that when he was alive. Even if he had, there were six other Pokémon there to fight with him.

"When did Dawn get a Zorua?" Misty whispered to Brock, who just shrugged.

Serena eyed Ash, Misty, and Brock as they all walked upwards, moving rather swiftly but not running this time. The ledges they were on were sickeningly narrow, and it took all of her willpower not to look down. Instead, she focused on the other three with her.

Serena knew that whatever came their way next, she would be the one to stay behind. At one time, that might have made her bitter, but now she was just anxious for whatever it was to happen.

A loud screech made her jump, the force causing her to yank one of the crystals out of the rock wall, but Brock grabbed her shoulder and steadied her. They all looked up and saw two Moltres fly by, one with a distinct glow to it while the other appeared solid.

Everyone was silent, waiting for something else to happen, but when nothing did, they kept going. Up and up, over narrow stone bridges, through thin tunnels and gaping caverns, inside and out of the tree again and again.

They were outside when Ash came to a sudden stop, staring down below them. Serena looked down, and bit her lip at what she saw, her hands fiddling with the crystal she still held.

From that vantage point, they could see the sheer violence below them. There were Pokémon battles as far as the eye could see. There were people fighting people. There were legendary Pokémon battling one another. There were the orange creatures devouring people. It was complete and utter chaos.

"Why are they here now?" Misty asked, nodding to the legendary Pokémon. "I thought they were supposed to stay hidden."

"I bet Arceus was making them, and he's a bit busy now," Brock noted. They couldn't see the dueling Arceus, since they were on the opposite side of the mountain, but they could still feel the shockwaves from the attacks. "They probably took advantage of that and came to fight when Team Rocket brought out all the other Mirage Pokémon."

"They're all prideful jerks who probably want to prove they're stronger than the Mirages," Ash noted, unable to hide his bitterness. Pikachu nodded his head in agreement, looking just as unimpressed as his trainer.

"They don't care about the destruction," Misty said sadly, her shoulders slumping a bit. "Just their own self-worth."

Serena was about to reach out to her when the sound of clapping reached them. The four trainers turned around and watched as a man approached them, still applauding them.

"Good job, you figured out the big problem with these guys." He pointed over as the Moltres flew by again. "They don't give a shit about the likes of you or me. Once the boss is done with them, things'll be different. They'll be better."

"Are you crazy? They might suck, but with you, we'll be dead," Ash pointed out.

The man laughed. "I like you. I hope you get to stick around after all of this." He pointed at himself. "The name's Proton, and you're not getting by me."

Brock opened his mouth to say something, but Serena stepped forward, blue-eyes narrowing. "Yes, they are."

"Who's going to stop me, Princess? You?" Proton asked. He burst into laughter before Serena could answer. "That's a good one."

Serena scowled fiercely at him and stormed towards him, only acknowledging her friends' cries to come back with a stern glare over her shoulder. This was her fight. "Yeah, me!" Without any warning, she lashed out, using the crystal that she had dislodged from the rock wall earlier to hit his face.

He yowled loudly from the gash she created, his smirk and playful attitude completely gone. "You bitch!" He lunged at her, and Serena ran. She ran by her friends that he completely ignored them in favour of pursuing Serena.

She ran like her life depended on it, which in reality, it probably did. She screamed as one Moltres was thrown just underneath the rock bridge she was on, the force enough to start crumbling the natural crossing. Serena ran forward, and screamed again when she was tackled to the ground. The bridge crumbled behind them.

Proton pulled her up from the ground, and Serena saw a flash of metal that made her panic. She wasn't sure if it was a gun or a knife, but whatever it was, she wouldn't be able to fight against that.

Muttering Misty's instructions to herself, Serena dropped low, grabbing his arm and using her body to throw him off his center of balance. She blinked with surprise when Proton flew over her head and slammed into the ground.

She didn't actually expect that to work.

Breaking out of her stunned silence of her own actions, Serena grabbed her Pokéballs, unleashing Delphox, Pancham, Sylveon, Vivillon, Florges, and her female Meowstic. She wasn't about to let anyone catch her with a stupid Pokéball jammer again.

She wasn't going to be the weakest link anymore.

...

Everything was oddly silent where they were. It was like the sounds of the battles below and around them had simply ceased to exist.

Pikachu's ears flattened against his head as Ash suddenly fell to his knees, his shoulders shaking as he shook his head. "I can't do this. I can't."

Misty knelt down in front of him, placing her hands on his shoulders. "Yes you can. We're almost there. You can do it."

"We're the only ones left, the three of us," Ash burst out, not even trying to hide his agitation. "You saw what just happened to Serena! And Dawn! We're leaving everyone behind to monsters!"

"That may be true," Brock said, kneeling beside them, "But that's why we have to keep going. To try and end this before something really bad can happen."

"But who says anything is going to change for us?" Ash waved his hands wildly to the ledges. "You can see how—how greedy the legendary Pokémon are! What if Arceus doesn't stop Team Rocket entirely? We could still lose even if Arceus wins!"

That had never occurred to Brock before, and from the looks on Misty's face, Ash had never brought it up to her before either. She shot Brock a worried look, because it was absolutely a possibility.

"Maybe," Brock finally agreed. "But we know everyone dies with Giovanni. At least with Arceus, it might be better."

"But it might be the same."

"It might. Isn't the small chance worth it?"

Ash looked unsure, tears swimming in his bright brown eyes.

"Pikapi." They all looked down at Pikachu, who climbed up onto Ash's lap. "Pikachu pi pika cha pika chu pika."

"I—I don't..."

"Pi."

Ash's shoulder slumped and he nodded at the Pokémon. "Okay. Okay yeah, we can do this. We can." He looked up at Brock and Misty. "I'm sorry."

"If you had told me, six, seven years ago that I would be trying to help that little kid who thought he could beat my rock-types with a Pikachu save the world, I would have told you that you were crazy." Brock clapped a hand onto Ash's shoulder. "Since then, we've seen so many ridiculous things. Our lives were on the line so many times. If given the chance, even knowing all of that, I wouldn't change my mind. I'd still go with you." He smiled. "You guys – all three of you – are my best friends. I think it was destined to be the three of us at this point."

"Just like how it began," Misty said with a bittersweet smile on her tired face. "Back to the beginning. Like Arceus said."

"Almost." They all went silent when they heard the distinct sounds of footsteps coming towards them.

Brock twisted around, waiting to see whoever or whatever it was. He'd been expecting them, if he was honest with himself.

What he wasn't expecting was the blonde woman with thick scars visible across her face and legs, a deranged look in her eyes. He knew who she was.

Domino. The one that had stabbed Mrs. Ketchum.

Domino stared them all down, her eyes landing on Brock. "You were one of Lance's men back at that base. You were one of the ones who did this to me." She glared at him. "I'll murder you myself."

Brock eyed her before glancing over his shoulder at Misty. "You forgot, I wasn't there in the beginning. Go." He looked back to Domino and threw his Pokéballs, unleashing Steelix, Crobat, Ninetales, Swampert, Toxicroak, and Blissey.

"Brock!"

"Go. End this." He nodded his head sternly. "I've got this one. You guys can do it."

"Take it!" Misty exclaimed wildly, reaching for the keystone with one hand as her other grabbed Ash's arm, ready to sprint around Domino when Brock attacked.

"No." He spoke sternly, leaving little room for arguing. "You'll need it more than me."

Both of them hesitated, and he added, "You can do this. Misty, you can get Ash up there, and Ash, you can fix this. I know you can. I've always known. Pikachu, take care of both of them, understand?"

Ash's eyes teared up as Pikachu climbed up on his shoulder and nodded sternly.

Then they ran.

"Steelix!" Brock yelled when Domino made a mad lunge for Ash and Misty. The steel-snake threw himself in between them, the knife doing nothing to penetrate his metal skin.

Brock sighed a breath of relief when he realized that Ash and Misty had made it through and were out of sight.

"I'll get them later," Domino muttered, eyeing Brock darkly. "It's you and me right now."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." He smiled confidently in his Pokémon. "Let's rock 'n roll."

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchindaPower

When The World Ends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Leaf grunted as she slammed into the ground, but refused to scream despite the pain that rushed through her hip and arm. She barely had time to think on it, quickly rolling out of the way just before Ariana's boot landed where her head had been a split second before.

She almost ran into the cursed Vileplume that slowed down her Pokémon with Stun Spore and Sleep Powder. Wind whipped by her, slamming the Pokémon into one of the large crystal stalagmites and knocking it out. Leaf breathed out a sigh of relief and moved again, standing beside her Ditto that looked like Ariana's Crobat.

Leaf breathed heavily as she eyed the woman, sweat dripping down her face. Her eyes instantly zeroed in on the woman's right hand as he went into her dirty white shirt.

Leaf's heart leapt and her breathe caught in her throat when she saw the shiny metal of the gun that ended up pointed at Venusaur.

At some point she ended up moving, but for the life of her, Leaf had no recollection of it. One second she was standing by Crobat, the next she slammed her entire body into Ariana, causing the woman to shoot the ceiling above them instead of any of the Pokémon. The gun was dislodged from her hand and skidded across the floor.

Leaf lunged at the weapon at the same time Ariana did while the Pokémon fought around them. They ended up in a pile of mismatched limbs, wrestling for control of the weapon.

A scream escaped Leaf's lips when Ariana stabbed her arm with a knife. She recoiled, and cried out again when the woman kicked her in the stomach. Winded, Leaf fell backwards, cringing as she roughly landed on the ground.

There was a soft click, and the teenager looked up. Time seemed to stop as she found herself staring down the barrel of the gun.

A part of Leaf's mind screamed for her to run, but the message didn't seem to get to any of her

limbs, and she just knelt on the rough ground, staring blankly ahead of her.

She closed her eyes.

Ariana's scream took her by surprise, and Leaf's eyes snapped open again. Her mouth fell into a surprised O when she found herself staring at the back of a rather short woman that stood before her protectively.

"Mom," she blurted out, though it was barely a whisper.

Amanda Green looked over her shoulder at her daughter, a vicious expression of protectiveness passing across her features as she whipped back around to stare at Ariana with heated green eyes.

"Not my daughter, you bitch!" She spat. "Wreck her, Blastoise!"

Leaf flinched as the large Pokémon appeared from seemingly out of nowhere, powerful water cannons sweeping Ariana herself off of her feet with a high pitched scream.

"Green," Ariana spat as she managed to push herself off of the floor, a wet mess. "I'm going to have fun tearing you apart."

"You can try," Green replied calmly. She turned to face Leaf and held her hand out to her.

Green met brown as mother and daughter stared at one another, apologetic and shocked respectively.

Slowly, Leaf's shock faded. She reached up and grabbed her mother's hand.

Green helped pull her daughter up, and the two faced Ariana side by side.

"You can try," Green repeated.

Ariana's eyes flickered from one to another, her expression darkening as she brought out a black remote. "I'll do more than try."

She hit the button, and the domes that were dug into the rock came to life with orange light.

...

Gary winced as Arcanine flew into a wall. He gritted his teeth together and tried to stay focused on what he was doing, confident in the strength of his Pokémon and their ability to work together without him commanding them, but it had been a long time since they had been in a battle like this.

They had been protecting their Pokémon by keeping them in their Pokéballs, but Gary had to wonder if that was truly smart. Sure, they really didn't have a way to get to Pokémon centers or Poké Marts without drawing attention to themselves, but surely it would have been better for their Pokémon to battle than sit around.

He shook his head, trying to focus on what he was doing at that moment. There really was no right or wrong answer no matter how he thought about that topic anyway.

"The kid's up there!"

Gary cursed loudly, wondering where the hell all of the Rocket Grunts were coming from. It was actually getting ridiculous.

Aerodactyl screeched angrily from above him as he soared around, staying out of the fight with Blastoise. Gary needed them both for his plan, but it was clear that neither were very happy staying out of the fight while the other Pokémon were injured.

Gary's plan was incredibly simple. Get up to the ledge where the crystals were and destroy it with Blastoise and Aerodactyl. It would block off at least this exit where his friends had gone, even if there were other tunnels. He didn't expect there to be so many Grunts.

Thinking back to the ship from Hoenn to Sinnoh, he should have expected this.

Gritting his teeth, Gary reached up to yank himself closer to the ledge. Before he could grab on, the rock exploded and he gasped, falling backwards.

Blastoise yelled out in horror and anger, aiming his cannons at the attacker. At the same time, Aerodactyl swooped down, grabbing onto Gary. He couldn't move fast enough away from the Hydro Pump though, and they slammed into the wall on the other side of the cavern.

Gary grunted as they slammed into the ground, and a second later his eyes snapped open and he looked up in horror. Aerodactyl had taken the full force of his strongest Pokémon's strongest attack, which happened to be his weakness, and then hit the ground.

Moving out of the Pokémon's grip, Gary looked at him, wincing when he saw how much pain Aerodactyl was in. An explosion drew his attention away, and Gary watched Blastoise fall from where he was standing, hitting the ground roughly.

Gary could hear his heart pounding in his ears as time seemed to stop. His other Pokémon surrounded him, but in turn, they were surrounded by Rocket Grunts and their Pokémon. No doubt there was a Mirage Pokémon nearby too, judging from the sounds of battle that echoed through the stone and crystal corridors.

Oddly enough, Gary's thoughts went to his grandfather. It wasn't self-centered to say that he wasn't sure the old man would survive hearing that his only grandson was gone. Then he shifted to Ash and Leaf. He should have had more time with his friends, he would have, if he had not been so immature, deciding that if he was in pain, they needed to be too. He knew they both forgave him, and hoped beyond everything else that they would be okay.

That was why he was there. Why he had gone on this insane adventure in the first place. To do everything in his power to make sure that his friends survived.

Gary wondered if this was what his aunt felt like before she died. He wondered if his mother's life raced before her eyes.

He wondered if his father had thought about him.

His Pokémon drew closer to him protectively, and he closed his eyes. If this was how it had to be, he'd accept it. As long as his friends kept fighting.

In what felt like an eternity, but also only the span of a heartbeat, he heard yells of fear and agony as blasts of warm air, steam, and electricity surged past him.

Gary's eyes snapped open in time to see thick vines wrap around one of the Grunt's Raticate, throwing it across the room. A Venusaur yelled in victory before moving onto the next target, all his vines moving to different ones. A Blastoise that visibly out-powered his was nearly drowning those he came up against. A vicious Charizard was lashing out with his flames. A large Snorlax slammed into several Pokémon and Grunts, while a Pidgeot that Gary could barely see picked

them off from above.

The last thing his eyes settled on was a Raichu lashing out with electricity, eyes narrowed.

A shadow appeared in the dust and steam, and Gary squinted to see who it was. When he recognized the man's features, he gasped. Though still sickly pale and rather skinny, Master Red stood tall and proud as his powerful Pokémon ripped through the hordes like they were going up against newly hatched baby Pokémon.

His crimson eyes landed on Gary, and an eyebrow raised as he made his way over. Gary felt his cheeks heat up, realizing how pathetic he probably looked.

"Where are Ash and Dawn?" Red asked him.

Gary blinked, not really expecting that, though he should have. He put a hand on Umbreon's flank to get the Pokémon to stop growling, though Red didn't seem bothered by him or any of his Pokémon, not even Blastoise, who managed to get over to them. "They went on ahead. I stayed behind to try and knock down that ledge." He nodded above them.

Red looked upward, his brow furrowing slightly, and Gary was struck by just how much Ash he could see in the man in that moment. Now that he knew, it was painfully obvious that they were related.

"How can I help?"

Well, he wasn't expecting that, but Gary would take it.

"I have a device my friend made that sets off a very small charge," Gary explained, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out the device. Bless Clemont and his inventions. "I need a way to get up there to put it in the ledge and set it off so that it cracks. I was going to get Aerodactyl and Blastoise to attack it after, to knock it down. That was it didn't just explode and fly everywhere."

Red nodded his head and whistled. His Pidgeot seemingly materialized next to him. "She can take you up. I'll keep everyone down here distracted and protect your Pokémon."

Gary was stunned, and numbly nodded his head. The Pidgeot eyed him for a moment before moving so that he could climb on her back.

He gasped as the Pokémon shot up, and couldn't remember ever going this fast in his life. In retrospect, he should have just flown Aerodactyl up but he thought it would be safer off of his Pokémon. So much for that.

He jumped off of Pidgeot's back and took out an army knife from his pocket. He dug a hole in the rock and shoved the device in it, setting it to go off. Quickly retreating back to Pidgeot, he was back in the air in time to watch the charge go off, barely audible over the battles below, a crack appearing on the ledge.

"Blastoise!" he yelled to his Pokémon, who looked up. "Hit the ledge with Water Gun." Hydro Pump would surely destroy it in the way they were avoiding. Water Gun should be enough to chip away at it though.

Pidgeot startled him but crying out loudly. She backed up a bit and flapped her wings violently, two powerful, concentrated blasts of air appearing and slamming into the rock. Razor Wind.

The two Pokémon continued their assault, until the ledge began to crumble and fall.

"Move!" Gary yelled loudly. His Pokémon reacted instantly, moving out of the way, as did Red's. The other Grunts that were starting to make their way into the cavern all yelled and moved backwards. They were all sealed behind the cave-in they caused.

Just like that, the whole cavern went silent.

As Pidgeot descended, Gary looked around, and blinked in shock. All of the Grunts were unconscious, as were their Pokémon.

Gary jumped off of the Pokémon, hugging his as they surrounded him.

He looked up at Red, who was staring at the rock wall they had created, and slowly made his way around the Pokémon and towards the man. His heart was racing again, though he didn't quite know why this time.

Red glanced at him briefly before turning to face the tunnel his friends went down. The Master clapped his hand on Gary's shoulder and distractedly said, "Good job, Blue." He hurried forward, his Pokémon following him without a word.

Gary stood frozen. Master Red had called him Blue. His father's nickname. The name Red would have known him as all his life.

For the first time, something lifted inside of him, and Gary was sure that his father would have been proud of him.

...

Tracey grimaced as his Kadabra slammed into the wall. It didn't come as an extreme surprise, the Pokémon was exhausted from teleporting them all, but that didn't mean the trainer had to like it. He quickly recalled the Pokémon back into his Pokéball, something he had already done with his Dodrio as well.

"Thank you," he whispered to the Pokéball. At the very least, they had managed to get away all the guns from the Grunts. It made the battles a little more even.

"Scyther!" he yelled in alarm as his old Pokémon hit the ground in front of him, struggling to get back up. He ran to the Pokémon's side, putting a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, you can go back now."

"Sc-Scyther scyth!" the Pokémon growled and shook his head. So instead, Tracey helped him up and the Pokémon staggered forward, holding out his arm-like blades and glaring at the Grunt before him.

The man whistled in appreciation. "That is one tough bug. I would love to have something like that on my team."

Tracey bristled at the thought, and Azumarill, Venomoth, and Smeargle drew in closer. He would never let any of them take his Pokémon.

Before he could reply, a loud screech filled the room, and his stomach dropped. He knew that sound.

Tracey stumbled back as the ceiling crashed in, and a beautiful, blue bird slammed into the floor. Articuno pushed herself up and glared as another Articuno, this one surrounded by a faint light, flew in after her.

Without any warning, the two Pokémon lashed out at one another. The Rocket Grunts and their Pokémon cried out in shock as the icy shockwave threw them all back. Neither real nor Mirage Pokémon cared that they were there.

Tracey groaned as he hit the wall, his Pokémon falling down around him. He heard Azumarill cry out in shock, and opened his brown eyes to see blue light rushing towards them. His Pokémon tried to shoot the attack away with her water, but all it did was veer it off course, slamming beside Tracey. It was close enough for him to feel though.

He remembered touching the icy water around Shamouti Island when helping Misty pull Ash out of the water. He remember it felt more like burning than freezing, and wondered how either of his friends had survived it. He wondered that even now as the same feeling rushed over his entire body.

Already exhausted, Tracey felt his energy leaving him. He was so tired, and couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe, if it was the end, that'd be okay. His friends would prevail, he knew they would, and he'd get to be with Daisy again.

Tracey wondered if his parents were okay and mentally apologized for not staying in touch better.

Ignoring the alarmed cries of his Pokémon, Tracey closed his eyes.

...

May screamed as Max pulled her out of the way as an orange Lileep lashed out where she had been crouched down. Instead of turning around towards them, the blob kept going and slammed into a Rocket Grunt, who was pulled inside while screaming.

Max had to give them credit, the bad guys had figured out very quickly that the orange forms were bad news. It made them lose interest in him and his sister very quickly.

Tugging him up with their interlocked hands, May started pulling Max towards a tunnel, their Pokémon flanking them. Despite the fact that Team Rocket's Pokémon were visibly attacking the creatures, they still ignored the Pokémon. Since they wouldn't attack the Pokémon, keeping her and Max in the middle of all theirs was a pretty good defense tactic.

May couldn't feel proud of thinking of it. Instead, all she felt was panic and desperation. She needed to get her brother out of there.

They both skidded to a stop as two women rushed out of the tunnel that they were about to go down.

"—ck that stupid dragon bitch!" One of them seethed before coming to a stop, staring at May and Max. "Really? There are more of you?"

"Don't worry about that one, she won't survive anyway," the other one noted. "Not with the surprise we left behind."

"Dragon," Max whispered. "They must mean Iris."

"Whatever, Annie," Oakley snarled. "We'll get rid of these two weaklings easily. Toss them off the ledge or something." She motioned to the ledge that was across the room from them, leading to a bigger fall than the one the Maple siblings had taken earlier.

May visibly bristled, her eyes narrowing at them. These were the type of people that were the

problem. Not the kids that were brainwashed and tricked.

Drew might have been alive now, but he had died. It was only sheer dumb luck that Jirachi and Manaphy were both paying close enough attention to bring him back.

She wasn't about to let that happen to anyone else.

"Altaria! Use Mist!" May yelled to her Pokémon, not waiting for the women to call theirs out. She wondered how many they had left if Iris had taken them on, and seemingly won.

"Mightyena! Smell them out!" Max ordered, and his Pokémon ran into the mist. He glanced at May. "What do we do with them?"

May bit her lip. It would be so easy to just toss them off the cliff and be done with it. At her breaking point, she probably would have done it, and at her worst, would have been severely depressed to even think it.

Reality was, it really was an option. She knew that. She accepted it.

It just wasn't the option that she was going to choose.

Mightyena yelped loudly and was thrown backwards. A moment later, a large Ariados scuttled out of the Mist, followed by a Vileplume.

May glared. "We fight them so that they can't hurt anyone else." She looked at her Pokémon. "Blaziken! Get that Vileplume!"

"Kirlia!" Max ordered. "Take out the Ariados!" He quickly called his injured Mightyena back to the Pokémon, recognizing the telltale sign of a poison sting on his Pokémon. As Kirlia and Blaziken darted forward, another orange blob appeared, this one in the shape of Tyrantrum, of all things.

Max yelped, and May pulled him close to her as their Pokémon surrounded them protectively.

...

Iris was extremely proud of herself for taking on two Team Rocket spies and defeating them rather soundly.

Iris was also extremely annoyed with herself for taking them out so easily and showing off her strength. It prompted them to leave behind two little surprises in the shape of very angry Mirage Pokémon.

Of course it had to be Reshiram and Zekrom. Of course. The dragons from her home region.

"Look out!" she cried out to her Emolga, who dodged out of the way of Reshiram's fireball. Her Pokémon were exhausted, and the Mirages weren't slowing down in any way, shape, or form.

Haxorus cried out in alarm, and Iris barely had the chance to look around before the Pokémon was looming over her, picking her up and holding her close to his chest. A split second later, they were thrown across the room by a powerful jolt of electricity.

Haxorus twisted himself almost into a ball around her to protect her from both the attacks and the impact, leaving him twitching and in agony. Electricity wasn't extremely effective on dragons, but from a Mirage Legendary Pokémon, it was an entirely different thing.

"No!" Iris screamed and scrambled out of the Pokémon's grip, moving to his head and putting her hand against it. "Haxorus." He moaned in agony, and she looked around, Druddigon and Hydreigon were both knocked out, though it had taken attacks from both Mirages at once to defeat the raging Hydreigon. Iris was so proud of the Pokémon that had listened to her every step of the way.

She was also really worried. Excadrill was thrown back into Emolga, and both slumped against the rock wall all the way across the cavern from her.

Reshiram and Zekrom turned towards her, and Iris couldn't stop herself from cringing.

Dragonite landed in front of her and Haxorus, growling at the two Pokémon.

"No!" Iris screamed again. With a quick glance at Haxorus, she made her way towards her last Pokémon. She ran in front of him pushed her hand against his warm scales of his stomach. "Fly away! Get out of here!"

Dragonite glanced down at her but shook his head and shoved her back behind him. Iris felt tears come to her eyes.

All of her Pokémon that she was so proud of, that she had wanted to protect in this mess that was spreading across the world, were going to die. How could she help all of the other Pokémon in need when she couldn't even help her own?

Two loud cries echoed through the cavern, and Reshiram and Zekrom were both thrown back by twisting blazes of purple fire. Iris looked up, alarmed and amazed as two Dragonite even larger than her own landed in front of them.

"Call back your other Pokémon!" Iris jumped at the woman's voice, and looked around to see Clair Greyson staring angrily at the Mirage Pokémon. "Iris! Hurry!"

She followed the advice of the woman who had briefly mentored her, recalling everyone but Dragonite. By that time, Clair was at her side, but she wasn't alone.

Iris almost forgot to breathe when she got sight of Champion Lance Greyson. Sure, she had seen him before, but it was still amazing.

"Three Dragonite against two Mirage Dragon-Types," Lance noted, blue eyes narrowing.

"Three?" Iris couldn't stop herself from asking. She half expected them to tell her to back off and let the professionals work.

Lance glanced down at her. "Clair says you show a lot of promise as a future Dragon Master. If she says that, you must be worth something. So yeah, three Dragonite."

Iris felt her spirits lift again, and her eyes narrowed with determination as she forced her sorrow away. No, this fight wasn't over yet.

She could still do her part to stop the rest of the Pokémon out there from suffering because of Giovanni.

...

Clemont couldn't remember the last time he had felt so much physical pain. Whenever he tried to move, he felt like something inside of him was trying to crack or dig into him, probably his ribs, or maybe his arm. Maybe both.

"Get him, Squishy!" Bonnie yelled loudly from where she stood in front of him.

Clemont looked up at his little sister, and was amazed to see absolutely no fear on her face, only sheer determination. He wasn't even sure how his sister knew that the real Zygarde had been the strange little Pokémon she carried around for so long that had just suddenly disappeared one day. He wasn't going to question it.

He desperately wanted to draw the young girl back to him, to protect her with everything he had, but every movement was agonizing. All he could do was watch in horror, his mind running through a hundred different ideas and plans that he realized would never work.

Clemont winced as rocks flew just over his head. He looked back at Bonnie, but she was alright, crouching close to the floor, a fierce glare on her face.

His eyes darted around the room, and settled on a dome that was dug into the wall. He eyed the machine for a moment before looking at the once greenish-blue, but now orange crystals beside it. Once he had theorized that perhaps the energy that made Mirage Pokémon – this energy that visibly presented itself with orange light, felt so wrong to Ash because it was Aura's opposite – a negatively charged energy where Aura was a positively charged one. Ash had stared at him blankly, but now Clemont was sure that he was right.

Suddenly, all he could see were those little domes that were poking out of the wall. Aura had seemed like such a strange, mystical concept, but a tangible energy was something Clemont could work with.

If he could find a way to make the energy overload, it might destroy the domes and get rid of the Mirage Zygarde. The hard part would be trying to quickly throw something together without the enemy Zygarde catching on to what he was doing.

His eyes landed on his sister again and his heart dropped. Clemont didn't like it at all, but they were running out of options right now. "Bonnie."

The little girl turned around and looked at him with worry. "What's wrong? Are you okay? Do you need something?"

Clemont was surprised by the fact that he smiled at her, but didn't think much on it before slowly nodding. "I need you to keep that Mirage Zygarde distracted no matter what, okay?" He nodded towards the domes.

Bonnie couldn't hide her surprise at the fact that he was encouraging her to help direct Zygarde in the battle, and then her eyes fell on the domes he nodded to and she knew. She knew that her big brother had an idea, and that they would be okay.

Scowling fiercely, she turned around and moved around the fighting Pokémon so that she was on the opposite side of the room from Clemont. "Hey, ugly! Come over this way!"

Clemont had to close his eyes at the sound of Bonnie taunting a very dangerous creature, and had to force himself not to vomit. That became even more difficult as he tried to move to haul himself across the floor.

If his baby sister could fight, he could certainly stand the pain to pull himself over to where he needed to be to get rid of the Mirage once and for all.

...

Cilan gasped and held his arm close to him in an effort to stave off the pain. He was sure it wasn't broken, but every little movement he made with the appendage caused him to cringe. Even so, he didn't hesitate for a moment to thrust out his arm, Pokéball in hand, to recall Stunfisk as the Pokémon slumped to the ground, eyes closed.

This man, Archer, was a much greater foe than he expected, or perhaps he had been out of the competitive battling scene for too long. At least he had smartly recalled his Audino when he realized the direction the battle was heading in. Audino could heal the worst of the wounds if he needed her to.

As his Lilligant fell and he recalled her, Cilan had to wonder if the defeat that he could taste earlier was his, not Archer's.

Cilan's eyes darted to the cavern behind him and he felt his heart pounding inside of his chest. Clemont, who seemed quite injured, and sweet little Bonnie were trapped inside there with the Mirage that this man was controlling. He had to do something to stop it.

"Simisage! Dodge!" he yelled to his last remaining Pokémon, who just managed to avoid the attack that was coming from behind him. The grass-type landed in front of his trainer, stumbling slightly from exhaustion and pain.

"Stay down!" Archer called out to him, his three remaining Pokémon surrounding him. At least Cilan could take some pride in the fact that they all seemed exhausted too. "Maybe you and your Pokémon will live if you do."

Cilan really doubted that.

His green eyes locked onto the controller. That was really the cause of all their problems right now, or at least one of the causes of that problem (he was starting to confuse himself).

"Simisage," he muttered, and his Pokémon shifted slightly, acknowledging that he was listening. "We're going to channel our inner-Ash and do something very, very stupid."

Simisage actually glanced back at him with worry before facing the enemy again and nodding. "Sage."

Cilan took a deep breath and was about to just go for broke and run at Archer, when the ground shook beneath their feet. He stumbled, and so did the Rocket Admin. The green-haired boy had no idea what was going on, but it would be foolish to use a handy distraction like this to his advantage.

Simisage cried out in shock as his trainer lunged towards Archer, slamming his taller, yet slimmer form into him. Archer cried out in shock, and the two went tumbling to the ground with a second shockwave.

Cilan slammed his elbow into Archer's stomach, causing the man to cringe in on himself, and reached out to grab onto the remote with his other hand. Archer realized what he was doing, and tried to push him off.

"Houndoom!" Archer called out, and the Pokémon launched itself forward, sinking his teeth into Cilan's arm.

He must have yelled in pain, because now his throat hurt along with his arm. Despite this, he didn't let go of the remote, spying a flash of green out of the corner of his eye.

Simisage jumped over the Wobbuffet and Victreebel that were there, kicking Houndoom in the

side. The fire-type yelped and Cilan jerked his arm away.

He used his full body weight to roll away from Archer, successfully tugging the remote with him.

Cilan's smile of victory lasted only a split second as he felt the ground vanish from beneath him, having rolled too far away from Archer, and too close to the edge of the tall cliffs. Looking up, Cilan watched as the edge of the cliff seemed to get farther away as if in slow motion, his stomach leaping into his throat as he fell. Simisage appeared at the edge and jumped after him.

He locked eyes with his Pokémon, and let the remote slip from his hands, knowing that it would smash. Knowing that just maybe his actions had saved two other people.

He thought of his brothers, and silently apologized to them, just in case they were still alive. If they weren't, he silently asked them to wait for him.

He thought of his Pokémon, and felt sick at the thought of Simisage dying with him but there was very little he could do while falling so rapidly. Cilan felt like he couldn't even lift his arms, though that may have also been from other injuries.

He thought of Iris, and he closed his eyes to hide the tears.

...

Dawn wanted to cheer loudly, pride rushing through her as the Mirage Darkrai disappeared into sparks of orange light. She restrained herself, because the man before her, Petral, looked furious. That didn't stop a smirk from spreading across her chapped lips though.

It occurred to her that the Mirage Pokémon might not be as strong as they were the previous times that they had run into them. There was probably so much energy going into the Mirage Arceus.

"You think you're something special, don't you?" Petral spat at her angrily. "If you think we're done yet, you're wrong."

Dawn's eyes widened and she took a step back, nearly stumbling on her wounded Zorua. The little Pokémon had been a huge help during the battle to confuse the Mirage Darkrai, but he was still rather young and inexperienced, hence why she never had him out before.

Zorua didn't seem to care about almost being stepped on. Instead, his blue eyes were focused on the new figure appearing.

"Pip!" Piplup called out in alarm as the Pokémon took shape. Dawn gasped, knowing this colourful creature, having seen it before.

Cresselia.

Darkrai hesitated at the sight of the other Pokémon, and Dawn could guess why. Panic erupted in her chest and she yelled, "She's not real! She's not your Cresselia!"

It was too late.

Lopunny tackled Dawn to the ground just in time to stop Darkrai from slamming into her as Cresselia attacked. Petral took full advantage of Darkrai's split second hesitation, and now the Pokémon was in a heap on the ground, already injured from his previous battle.

"What a pathetic thing," Petal noted. "Get rid of it, Cresselia."

"No!" Dawn screamed and launched herself forward, ignoring the cries of her Pokémon. She full-body tackled the Mirage Pokémon, slightly surprised that it had a solid form.

The Cresselia and Petral were both clearly startled by her brash move, since she actually managed to knock the Pokémon to the ground before skidding herself.

Dawn grimaced and looked down at her legs, now sporting thin but bleeding cuts. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that Darkrai was slowly pushing his way off of the ground, and relief rushed through her. She saved him.

A shadow loomed over her, and she looked up. The young girl jerked backwards as Cresselia loomed over her angrily. Her breath caught in her throat as she heard Petral call for the attack from somewhere behind the Pokémon.

Cresselia reared back, and Dawn scrambled backwards, not caring about the pain stabbing her leg and her palms.

Then a rock slammed into Cresselia from above, forcing the Pokémon to the ground again.

Dawn stared. Petral stared.

"Prepare for trouble!"

"And make it double!"

"No," Dawn whispered, her head jerking up. Her dark blue eyes scanned the cliff sides, but then a larger shadow blocked out the sun from even farther above, and she tilted her head back to see.

It was a giant Meowth-shaped balloon slowly descending until they could see the occupants dramatically standing back to back, their eyes closed as the wind rippled their hair and matching black jackets. The male of the two was even holding a rose under his nose.

"To protect the world from devastation!"

"To unite all people within our nation!"

"To denounce the evils of truth and love!"

"To extend our reach to the stars above!"

"Jessie!" She opened her eyes and turned around to point at them.

"James!" He did the same, pointing his rose in their direction.

"Team Rocket is going to blast off for good at the speed of light!" Jessie pointed towards the sky.

"And we're going to help that happen, so get ready to fight!" James threw his arm dramatically into the air, his rose soaring and hitting Petral in the face.

"Meowth! That's right!" The Pokémon jumped from inside the balloon's basket, standing on the ledge between his two partners.

Dawn wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh, cry, or scold their theatrics at such a serious time, but it seemed to catch Petral completely off guard. She'd take that.

So would Darkrai, apparently.

Mirage Cresselia pushed herself back up, but Darkrai chose that moment to attack, his powerful Shadow Ball slamming into the false Pokémon and destroying it.

"What are you doing here?" Dawn called out.

"We're the Twerp's good luck charms! We need to be here!" Jessie said while pointing to herself.

"Traitors!" Petral hissed, fingers going for the remote again to no doubt create yet another legendary Pokémon.

A mechanical hand shot out of the balloon and grabbed it from him, bringing it back up to James. The man took one look at it before tossing it over his shoulder, and it shattered on the ground.

"Least we didn't get dat guy mad at us," Meowth responded to Petral's exclamation.

The Rocket Admin looked around, and took a nervous step backwards as Darkrai loomed over him.

Dawn pushed herself to her feet, glaring at him harshly as the Pokémon once again surrounded her, Jessie and James also coming to her side once their balloon landed (how had they even gotten that up there with all the fighting).

Petral gulped nervously and held up his hands. "So, who's up for some negotiating?"

...

Serena probably should have screamed at one point from fear or even pain, she would have in the past, but while her split, bloody lip did sting, and she was sure her bruises had bruises, nothing else really hurt, and she didn't feel afraid of anything. In fact, she felt like she could do absolutely anything in that moment.

That may have been the adrenaline talking though.

Apparently this Proton guy had never come face to face with a fairy-type before. As luck would have it, she had two.

Meowstic's eyes started to glow, and Proton's Crobat was thrown into yet another crystal structure. Vivillon flew above him quickly, sparkling blue powder falling onto him and forcing the Pokémon to fall asleep.

Delphox waved her branch around, releasing a spiral of fire that slammed into the exhausted Weezing. Though his Beedrill had defeated her Pancham, and both Sylveon and Florges were exhausted, Serena's Pokémon were holding their own. So was she.

Proton's hat was gone, his once styled green hair askew, and he was absolutely livid. A girl, not even an actual competitive trainer if Giovanni's files on all of Ash Ketchum's friends were accurate, had defeated him. It would have been one thing if it were the boy himself – he was Red's son, after all – but this was an absolute insult that he could not let stand.

His dark eyes narrowed as he glared at Serena, who stared back defiantly. She seemed to have forgotten one very important thing.

He pulled out a remote, and her eyes went wide. She looked around wildly, searching for the domes that would generate the Mirage Pokémon.

Serena screamed when the Mirage Moltres flew around the corner and unleashed a torrent of fire.

She threw herself to the ground, the flames separating her from her Pokémon. Breathing heavily, she was about to lean her head on the ground, but realized there was no ground under her head.

Panic erupted in her chest when Serena realized she was at the edge of the cliff that led to a drop so steep, the bottom wasn't visible in the fog. She scooted back so her entire body was safely on the rocky ledge, but in doing so, she let her guard down. Serena screamed when Proton seemed to appear out of the flames, pinning her to the ground with his heavier body weight.

She saw the Mirage Moltres dive, no doubt going for her Pokémon. Much to her relief, a second Moltres appeared to protect them, throwing the other Pokémon aside. There was far too much chaos for them to get to her though.

"You know, you're really easy on the eyes," Proton muttered as he eyed her in a way that made Serena's stomach squirm. "Maybe we could have some fun before I get rid of you."

Fear and anger coursed through her, and she jerked her leg, slamming it into his crotch. He yelped as flinched off of her, and she pushed herself up and moved back. Unfortunately, this left her dangerously close to the edge of the cliff. Serena glanced behind her, gulping nervously as she realized that one wrong move would have her spiraling to her death.

"You bitch!" He threw himself at her in a fit of rage, and this time she didn't have time to scream, only gasp. She threw out her fist as he came at her, his own momentum causing it to ram into his stomach harshly. While he was hunched over and winded, Serena rolled and used all of her body mass to knock his legs out from under him, his own position causing him to pitch forward.

Serena screamed from surprise when he went over the ledge that she had been so close to. She scurried to the side, and saw him hanging onto a small outcropping not far below them, the remote falling and smashing, destroying the Mirage Moltres at the same time.

She held out a hand, almost not recognizing it as her own from the scratches and dirt on it. "Grab my hand!"

At first, Proton seemed startled by this, and actually seemed to contemplate it. Then anger crossed over his face again.

"I'd rather die."

Serena wanted to scream about men and their ridiculous pride, but all she could do was watch as his fingers slipped from the ledge and he fell.

...

The first time Brock had run into Domino years ago, she hadn't used a single Pokémon and was a formidable opponent. She had been able to sneak into Blackthorn City's secret base without much effort, and from what he understood now, she had been the one to defeat and kill Agatha, with minimal help from her Pokémon.

Whatever Giovanni had done to her, it left her unhinged, like a rabid Pokémon backed into a corner.

That instantly made Brock wary of her. She was dangerous in her right mind. Adding unpredictability to that wasn't much fun.

Neither was the fact that the Pokémon she was given seemed to be of the same mind. Brock wondered if it was on purpose, since she didn't seem to care of the fate of the Houndoom,

Mightyena, Gengar, Salamence, Bronzong, or Ariados she released. They were powerful and wild, turning the attention of all Brock's Pokémon to them and away from their trainer.

Domino took advantage of that.

Brock jerked backwards as she lashed out from behind a glowing, orange crystal. Her knife got the edge of his green shirt, cutting a gash in the sleeve.

"Stay still, I'm not going to kill you!" she insisted, a wild tint to her voice as Brock ran and hid behind another crystal outcropping. It may have seemed like a cowardly act, but he didn't particularly care. Her focusing on him kept her from going after Ash and Misty, and staying out of her reach kept him alive.

Brock slowly walked backwards as she drew nearer to where he was. He was inclined not to believe her statement, since she did announce that she was going to murder him earlier.

"I want you and your friends to see our new, wondrous world." She sounded like she was positively gushing at the thought. One minute she seemed to harbor nothing but anger towards Giovanni, but the next she seemed to worship him. "Then I'm going to skin you all alive."

There we go. There was the psycho part.

Brock peeked around the corner and was alarmed when he didn't see her. He backed up a little bit, looking over his shoulder slightly.

The glint was the only warning he had as the knife rushed towards him. Brock dove out of the way, but not before she got his bicep, pain lancing through his arm. He instinctively jerked his leg back, feeling it hit her somewhere (he wasn't looking, nor did he dare look back) before he hurried away from her.

"We have videos of them, you know. Your parents."

That made Brock stop and he spun around to stare at her. She was pushing herself up from the ground, a wicked grin on her face. He glared at her. "You don't know who I am."

"I do. They made sure we knew who all of you were. You're Brock Slate. Used to be a Gym Leader when your shitty parents were shittier and couldn't." Her eyes glinted with excitement. "We recorded it. They begged us to spare each other's life. Isn't that sweet? They died crying out for each other. Well, no. It's a bit hard to hear, but that's not the last thing they said. Do you want to know what it was?"

Brock's hand curled into a fist. He knew she was baiting him, but he couldn't stop himself from taking it. She must have seen this, even though he didn't say anything, judging from the glee in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Brock." That's what your father said. Your mother was saying your name along with the rest of the spawn. Isn't that sweet?"

Anger coursed through him and tears welled in his eyes. This pain was far worse than the wound on his arm. This pain was wild and angry like a raging forest fire.

Domino sprang into action, but he didn't run this time. Instead, he grabbed her arm when she tried to drive her knife into his torso, using her own momentum to jerk her around and throw her behind him. Domino hit the ground and rolled, looking back at him with a grin that oozed insanity.

"There you go. Putting those muscles to good use." She seemed positively giddy at the thought. She got back up, and once again rushed at him. Brock quickly realized that there was very little planning in her movement. She was, indeed, acting like a wild, sick Pokémon. He could work with that.

What he couldn't work with was the cream-coloured Pokémon that launched herself between Brock and Domino. The Pokémon's sharp teeth dug into Domino's arm, and she only released the woman to let out a yelp as Domino's knife went into her side.

"No!" Brock yelled as Ninetales stumbled away whining with every move she made.

Domino held her arm and stared at the Pokémon with dark eyes. "What a pretty Ninetales. Perhaps I'll make it into a coat after we're done."

"Like hell you will." Brock would throw her off of the Tree of Beginning before he let her hurt any of his Pokémon that way. He stood between her and Ninetales protectively, ignoring his Pokémon's yelp of protest.

Predictably, Domino came after them again. He grabbed at the hand wielding the knife, not even wincing as he accidentally grabbed the blade instead of her hand. The silver blade sunk into his fingers and palm, and he used his free hand to grab her other one. She tried to kick him but he deflected her with his own legs.

Then Brock saw something move behind her. His barely had time to react as Toxicroak rushed forward and jabbed a poison barb into her back.

Domino screamed this time, and Brock used her shock to overpower her, actually lifting her off of the ground and throwing her away. She rolled, and this time she didn't get up.

His attention instantly went to Ninetales, and he knelt at her side, putting pressure on the wound, not at all caring for his own or that the Pokémon's blood was getting into the gashes on his hands. "It'll be okay, I promise." She cooed and licked his uninjured arm.

"Blissey!" His pink Pokémon surged forward, a little worse for wear, but still ready for a fight. In this case, the fight being to heal her injured friend.

"Blissey, you need to heal Ninetales."

"Nine!" The Pokémon protested and nodded at Brock's wounds.

"Ninetales first," Brock ordered.

Blissey looked conflicted, but went to heal Ninetales first. Sighing in relief, Brock took his hands away and winced at the sight of them, the pain finally catching up to him. He pulled off his green outer shirt and wrapped it around his hand.

A gurgling sound caught his attention and he looked back around to see Domino squirming on the ground. When she rolled, he could see her back and the deep injury that his Pokémon had given her, her skin visibly turning purple.

He had always known that Toxicroak wasn't truly hurting him when he jabbed him to drag him from women, but here was even more proof of what he could have done if he chose to.

Brock was a nurturer, a healer, but despite that, he felt only a sliver of empathy for Domino as he watched her fall silent and still.

...

The air was thin and cold, and despite the adrenaline rushing through her, and the non-stop physical activity of their mad dash up a giant mountain, Misty found herself shivering a bit. So when Ash suddenly came to a stop, she almost protested. At least when they were running like mad people, it helped a bit.

He looked at her, anger and hurt fighting for dominance in his eyes as he panted. He didn't say anything, he just stared at her.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu prompted for her. As much as Misty loved Ash, it was a bit unnerving to see him staring at her like that.

Ash blinked at his Pokémon before shaking his head. "Misty. Maybe you should wait here."

She stared back at him.

"It's just...I don't like that everyone's been staying behind to get me up this Arceus-forsaken mountain. I don't." He looked up. "But Giovanni's up there. Two Arceus are up there. It's dangerous. So maybe...maybe it'd be better for you to go back down."

"I..." Misty trailed off.

"It's okay. You can go. Don't feel guilty about it."

"I wasn't going to say anything like that. Don't put words in my mouth, Ash Ketchum," she snapped, putting her hands on her hips and glaring fiercely. "I was going to say that I kind of want to punch you right between the eyes." He clearly wasn't expecting that. "I am not afraid of some giant windbag and his fake-ass Pokémon and you don't get to decide what's too dangerous for me!"

"Misty—"

"No!" She pointed at him, jabbing her finger into his chest as her eyes flashed dangerously. "I followed you through thick and thin. I've risked my life before for you and for everyone else too. I'm not afraid. Hell, you're supposed to be good with strategy." She knocked on the top of his head. "Think! Giovanni killed my sisters! He targeted Cerulean because I made a fool of his Grunts. Of him. I am personally motivated to kick his ass, so use that!"

They stared at one another, surprised brown eyes gazing down into determined green ones. Pikachu looked from one trainer to the other as if watching an intense battle.

Misty's eyes softened slightly and she sighed, dropping her hands so that they hung loosely at her sides. She took a couple steps towards him and leaned her forehead on the shoulder opposite of the one Pikachu was perched upon. Startled, Ash rested his hands on her back.

"I know you just want to protect me. I get that. I appreciate that, I promise. But don't you think I want to protect you just as much?" Though not looking up at him, Misty knew that he was biting his lip unsurely as he wrestled with the side of him that just wanted to take charge and protect everyone, to make himself the martyr so everyone else would be safe, while the other was trying to accept her help and point of view.

A loud bang from the tunnel that they were standing in front of caused them both to break out of their thoughts and look up. Pikachu's eyes narrowed as his cheeks started to spark.

Ash huffed through his nose and took out a Pokéball, tossing it into the air. Charizard appeared and

stretched out his wings, immediately snarling at the sound in the tunnel.

"Ash—"

"If you want to come..." he said, and her heart rose a bit. "We're high enough where Charizard can fly us and it won't matter much. He's fast, and strong enough to carry us both."

Charizard puffed up his chest proudly before bending slightly, nodding towards his back. Pikachu immediately jumped up, resting just behind his horns.

Ash climbed up next and held a hand out to Misty. She grabbed it and climbed up with him, immediately welcoming the warmth from the fire-type's skin. She felt Ash move an arm around her to secure her better on his Pokémon, and shot him a curious look.

Ash grimaced. "This isn't going to be like the other times you flew on him. We're going to have to go fast." To prove his point, there was an explosion from somewhere above them. Right, God was fighting a false God somewhere above them.

Charizard launched into the air and Misty was instantly glad for the extra support. She had never felt him fly so fast before.

Misty gasped and buried her face into Charizard's orange scales as a shockwave from the fighting Pokémon caused them to spiral in the air. The Pokémon quickly righted himself and flapped his massive wings harder.

The flight was surprisingly short. She looked up as Charizard landed on the ground, blinking with surprise to see that they were in front of yet another tunnel that looked like it led up towards the summit

Ash slid off of Charizard first, and she followed, Pikachu jumping onto his shoulder once again. The boy pressed a finger to his lips, signaling everyone to be quiet. Slowly, they crept up through the tunnel. Misty was slightly surprised that Charizard managed to move so quietly.

Despite her diligence, Misty ended up running into Ash when he came to a sudden stop. She looked at him curiously as he peered around a corner.

"What the hell?" He broke the silence and moved around the bend and out into the open. Misty tried to grab at his shirt, but he moved too quickly. Charizard huffed with annoyance, but they both moved forward as Pikachu cooed in worry.

Misty gasped at what awaited them. There were six Pokémon on the ground, all beaten and unconscious, and the area was practically ripped apart.

"What is—" Misty cut herself off when she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She took a step backwards, but relaxed a bit when she saw who it was. "Mewtwo. What happened here?"

Ash was suddenly in front of her, spreading his arms out. "That's not Mewtwo, Mist."

She blinked and narrowed her eyes, wanting to hit herself when she realized that she was staring at a Mirage Mewtwo.

The implication of that hit her fast and hard. Yung's Mirage Mewtwo from years ago had been ridiculously powerful, and she had no doubt that this one was stronger.

"My friend here sent the 'real' coward running with the Mew that once lived here, no doubt to try

and save the pathetic creature's life." Misty jumped a bit as Giovanni appeared around the corner, the light breeze ruffling his suit jacket slightly as he eyed them. "Though what right did that creature have to judge this one?"

"Mewtwo is real," Ash snapped angrily. "That thing isn't."

"Oh, but he does real damage, does he not?" Giovanni took a step forward. Charizard snarled and he stopped. Mirage Mewtwo took a step forward instead. "You think you could stand up to this Mirage? He is stronger than the real thing, and my own Pokémon were trained to perfection." He waved to the unconscious creatures. "You can see how that ended up. How do you think you will fair?"

"Ash," Misty whispered suddenly. "He's trying to distract us." Ash glanced over at her quickly before looking back at Giovanni.

Misty glanced up towards Ash, who had tilted his head and narrowed his eyes slightly. She knew that look. He was thinking, strategizing. The sound of the two Arceus battling reminded both of them about why they were really there.

Ash looked towards her and reached out, touching his Keystone that was around her neck. "For your sisters?"

Misty instantly understood and grasped the necklace. "For everyone." She reached for her Pokéballs, ghosting over Lumineon's, knowing that while her Pokémon would love to help, there was no way that was possible up there. She wasn't the little girl that threw out a Goldeen with no water anymore.

She threw her other Pokéballs, releasing Starmie, Corsola, Marill, Milotic, and Gyarados.

Giovanni burst into cruel laughter. "You're going to hide behind a woman? Let her fight your battles for you?"

"You're not my problem," Ash said simply, and the man suddenly looked insulted. "And she's not fighting alone." One of his Pokéballs burst open without any prompting on his part, and Ria stood in front of them.

"Ash—" Misty started, but he shook his head.

"Aura beat them once," he said, shifting his bag onto his back. "And you're one down."

Misty wanted to argue, to scream at him that he needed all of his Pokémon with him, but she didn't. He was right about his logic, and she knew that it would give him a tiny peace of mind to know Ria was with her.

"We can do this together," Ria insisted to the redhead.

She nodded and glanced over at Ash. "Go."

He bolted, Charizard rushing into the air above him as Pikachu held onto his trainer's shoulder.

"Mewtwo!" Giovanni growled. "Follow him!"

"Stop him!" Misty yelled her Pokémon.

Ria jumped forward and created a shield that Mewtwo slammed into, ricocheting backwards.

Giovanni scowled at Misty. "You think you can beat me, girl?"

Her fingers curled around the Keystone, and it started to glow with a bright, golden light. The stone on Gyarados responded, light surrounding her Pokémon as it shifted into its stronger form.

"Yeah, I think I can," she said as the light faded away and Gyarados practically roared to affirm this.

Giovanni actually seemed a bit startled by this revelation. He opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by a great roar and flash of light from the sky.

Misty covered her eyes from the light, and screamed as something massive slammed into the cliffs not far below them, causing her to fall over. She blinked, trying to figure out what had just happened.

Shivers erupted across her skin as Giovanni started laughing madly. She pushed herself to her feet and ran towards the side of the cliff, Ria at her side, to see what had happened. She gasped, and her heart dropped.

Arceus was laying on the ground, unmoving, a massive gash in his side, his fur and the ground around him rapidly turning red.

Above them, the Mirage Arceus cried out victoriously.

He had won.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

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Thus The Earth Shall Turn To Ash

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Ash and his Pokémon were running up a steep path (well, Charizard was flying, and Pikachu was holding onto his shoulder, but that wasn't the point) that led up to the summit of the mountain. He felt his heart thumping in his ears, screaming at him to move fast so that he could get back to Misty.

He hadn't wanted to leave her with Giovanni. Ash knew Misty was a fighter, that she could take care of herself, but that didn't mean he had to like leaving her with a psychopath. Or was he a sociopath? Ash didn't know the difference.

The sooner he got up there, to the top, the sooner this would be over. Briefly, he entertained the notion that they were actually supposed to go to the heart of the tree, and was almost in tears at the thought. No, he wasn't going to let himself think that way. They were in the right spot.

Her breath caught in his throat as he reached the top. The stones rose out of the ground to create a shrine that reminded him a lot of the Shamouti Island one, but instead of three spots for orbs gazing out over the ocean, this one had a circular place in the middle where he was probably supposed to put the orbs.

"Pika cha pika pika," Pikachu whispered.

"It is almost over," Ash muttered as he took a step forward.

He really wished that he hadn't spoken out loud. Ash felt the pain and the fear before he saw or heard anything else. Spinning around, he cringed and covered his eyes from the light, falling to the ground from the shockwave from the attack that caused something huge to slam into the ledges below them.

He knew what it was before he even looked. He dropped the bag with the orbs at the base of the shrine, and made his way to the edge of the cliff to look down.

Arceus laid below him, clearly dying. The Mirage Arceus roared victoriously.

Ash felt numb. At first, he felt anxious, terrified, angry, thankful, and so many different emotions, positive and negative, that he couldn't really feel anything if he wanted to. It was all too much and left him with nothing.

He should be despairing. He should be crying and screaming about how close they were, but now it was all for nothing. Everything was for nothing. Yet, as he stared down towards Arceus, he felt nothing.

Pikachu nudged him gently, reminded him that he should have been doing something. Anything. Instead, he just kept standing there like he had melded with the rest of the Tree of Beginning, become a statue and nothing more. Nothing prompted him to move. Not Pikachu and Charizard pleading. Not Misty's cry. Not Giovanni's laughter. He honestly felt like he had ceased existing right then and there.

Then Arceus moved, and that one movement sparked something in Ash. He wasn't feeling a dead Arceus. He was feeling a dying one, which meant that he was still alive. He could still be saved.

It seemed as if the Mirage Arceus realized this too (or maybe it was Giovanni), since he flew down towards them, no doubt for the kill.

Ash threw his Pokéballs, releasing Sceptile, Garchomp, and Greninja. He looked at them, Charizard, and Pikachu. "I—we have to save him. This won't matter if he's dead." He motioned towards the shrine. "I need you to—I don't want to ask, but—"

"Pikapi," Pikachu interrupted before pointed over his heart. "Pikachu pi pika cha pika Pikachu pika."

They were all in sync, they all knew what Ash was asking of them without him saying a word, and in turn, he knew their answer.

Choking back tears, Ash said, "I'm proud of all of you, you know that, right? I'd be nothing without you or our other friends."

Garchomp stomped awkwardly, like he didn't know what to say to that. Sceptile inclined his head. Greninja patted Ash's arm. Charizard snorted and nudged him.

Pikachu hugged Ash's head and whispered, "Pika pi cha pika."

Ash nodded and Pikachu jumped off of his shoulder. He looked back as he started to jump and slide back down towards where Arceus was, watching Pikachu climb onto Charizard and take off into the sky. They were going to bring the Mirage Arceus to them, so that the others could fight from the ground.

Ash managed to slide and scale his way down the mountain unnoticed, realizing very quickly that Giovanni and Mirage Mewtwo were once again distracted by a raging Mega Gyarados, Ria, and Misty's other Pokémon.

He came to a stop, wincing as he had to walk in a massive puddle of blood to get to Arceus' injury.

The Pokémon opened his eye just a sliver.

"It'll be okay," Ash muttered, reaching his hands out to the wound that was bigger than him. He was sure he could fit inside of it if he was inclined to. He had never healed something so big before.

Taking a deep breath, Ash closed his eyes and gathered his Aura, wishing that the natural Aura in the Tree of Beginning hadn't been corrupted. It was though, so it was unusable and he was on his own. With his own power, he reached out, and began to heal Arceus' injury.

...

Blue. Red had called him Blue, and that wasn't something that Gary was prepared to forget. He had always heard so many good things about his father, and a part of him wondered just how he compared to the man.

Sure, Gary Oak did have memories of his parents and his aunt, but the older he got, the more they faded, or the more he questioned if they were real or some fantasy that he made up. Yet here was Red, who had known his father better than almost anyone else, briefly mistaking him for the man himself.

It was more than just a little flattering in Gary's mind. It made him feel a rush of energy that he hadn't in a long time. So when Red continued heading up the mountain, but suggested that Gary find another way down to help everyone below, he didn't feel insulted at all, or like he was being pushed aside.

He got the distinct feeling that the Pokémon Master would have given the same instructions to his father, once upon a time. Besides, there was something down lower that Gary wanted to get to for more selfish reasons.

"Umb!" Umbreon cried out suddenly. He was Gary's smallest Pokémon, and the one that he kept out with him. Red had given him a potion for his friend, and Gary was glad for it. He didn't want to get caught by any Pokéball jammers, though he doubted anyone would use them, since that would prevent Team Rocket from bringing out more Pokémon.

Gary came to a stop at his Pokémon's exclamation, and yelped as the wall just in front of them exploded inwards. Both of them managed to avoid the rubble

"Thanks," he said to Umbreon, who nodded in reply. The sounds from beyond the hole in the wall were loud, so Gary was cautious when he looked around to see what it was.

His green eyes went wide as he watched people battling. This was where they had started, where he wanted to be.

"Bre!" Umbreon said, nodding towards the left.

"Let's find her," Gary agreed, trusting his Pokémon to be able to sniff out Leaf better than he could spot her in the chaos.

And chaos it was. He wasn't sure which knocked out Pokémon belonged to trainers, and which belonged to Team Rocket. Then again, there really wasn't much of a difference between them at that point.

"Um umbreon!" the Pokémon cried out with alarm and shot forward. Gary felt his heart leap into his throat as he ran after him, almost skidding to a stop when he finally caught sight of Leaf.

Her hair was askew, parts of the tips were singed; she had dirt and blood smeared on her, sweat dripping down her face, and there were small tears in her clothes. She looked like a complete mess.

And Gary was so excited to see her, but that excitement quickly left him.

Despite the noise in the cavern, Gary clearly heard Leaf's surprised scream when she was knocked backwards and lost her footing, stumbling over the cracks in the ground and landing harshly, cutting her arm on a nearby crystal.

Leaf twisted around, but he couldn't see what she was looking at from his point of view. What he could see was the sudden fear on her face as she scrambled backwards.

There was a loud bang, and both Gary and Leaf screamed at the same time.

...

Ariana loomed over Leaf, and the teenage girl couldn't keep the fear off of her face at the gun in the woman's hand. It always came down to this, didn't it? She hated the sheer existence of such a weapon that was nearly impossible to defend against. The only thing that really worked was a very strong shield of some sort, something that she didn't have at the moment.

Ariana pulled the trigger, and Leaf's world stopped. A scream escaped her lips, and she vaguely heard someone else screaming along with her. It was familiar, but it didn't matter.

What mattered was the fact that her mother was standing over her, arms spread out protectively. Dusty brown eyes met sage green ones, and Amanda Green fell to the floor, the blood on her black dress not visible, but the wetness was.

"Mom!" Leaf screamed and scrambled forward to try and soften the blow. She held onto her, putting pressure on the chest wound. The woman was somehow still alive, her breathing shallow with an almost whistle-like pitch to it, a bit of blood staining her lips when she coughed. "Come on, get up!" Leaf urged the woman, blinking her eyes rapidly. "You always told me to walk it off, so walk it off!" That had almost been Amanda Green's motto for her daughter when she was growing up.

Amanda laughed a bit at that, grimacing at the blood that bubbled by her mouth. Everything tasted like iron. She stared up at her daughter that looked so much like her, and self-pity rushed through her.

She had years to know an amazing girl, but had pushed it aside for selfish reasons. It wasn't Leaf's fault that she had her father's hair and eye colour.

"Get away from them!" Leaf's head snapped up as she watched a Shadow Ball slam into Ariana, throwing her across the room and to an oddly bent heap on the floor away from them.

Gary and his Umbreon were beside them almost instantly, his eyes wide as he stared at Leaf's mother.

"Leaf," Amanda spoke up before anyone could say anything else. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Leaf snapped. She wanted to ask Gary if this stabbing pain in her chest was true anger, since she had never quite felt this way before. Not even when Beartic was injured. Tears welled up in her eyes, despite her internal protests. "Just get up."

Green pressed his shaky hand to Leaf's cheek as she stared up at her. "You're such a beautiful, young woman. You are going to be a great person. Much better than me. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing!" Leaf almost shrieked before snapping her attention to Gary. She wanted to wipe away the tears that dared to fall, but she had to keep her hands on her mother's chest. "Gary! Tell her to stop! Help me stop the bleeding!"

Gary hovered over them, biting his lips and struggling to meet her eyes. "Leaf..."

"Do it!" she demanded.

Gary knelt beside her and put his hands over hers so that they were both putting pressure on her mother's wound.

Green met Gary's eye and she smiled. It was an incredibly strange expression, especially from a dying woman. "Gary, your parents, your father, would be so proud of you. I am too. Both of you are so much better than he or I could ever be." She coughed and choked a bit. "You're everything he would have wanted, never doubt that."

Gary couldn't look away, no matter how much he wanted to, the pain of her words stabbing through him. He nodded his head. "Thank you."

"What are you—stop it!" Leaf felt like she wanted to laugh, cry, scream, and so much more all at once. She didn't realize how hysterical she sounded. She stared at her mother. "Get up! Mom! Please!"

"I am very proud of you," Green said. "You are everything I wanted to be, but never could." She coughed, and her voice grew faint as she struggled to speak. "You were the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Wake up!" Leaf shrieked. "Amanda! Green! Mother!" She shook her body, still keeping pressure on the wound even as Gary took his hands away. "Wake up! Please wake up! Mom!"

"Leaf," Gary said, placing a hand on her shoulder, not caring that it was smeared with blood. They were a mess as it was anyway. He bit his lip as he watched her. "She's gone."

"No!" Leaf shrugged him off fiercely. "It's just blood loss! Why aren't you helping her?" She looked back to her mother. "Mom! Get up! Please." Her voice broke, her words lost to violent sobs as her hands fell away from the wound.

Gary reached out and wrapped his arms around her as Umbreon cooed sadly. Leaf's Pokémon that were still out slowly approached, standing protectively around them to keep everyone else away. Green's Pokémon cried out in horror.

Leaf's grip on Gary's shirt tightened, and she screamed.

...

Cilan didn't scream as he fell. At first, the feeling was a horrible twist of his stomach trying to climb out of his throat in slow motion, but then he felt oddly numb and calm. His fate was inevitable, there was nothing he could do to fight it.

That didn't mean that Simisage agreed with him.

Despite just how fast they were both falling, Simisage managed to twist himself around. He watched, and he waited for the opportune moment. Then he saw the outcropping of rocks, and lashed out with his Vine Whip attack. One vine wrapped around the rocks, securing him, and the other wrapped around his trainer, carefully, as to not snap his back from a sudden stop. Once the vines were around Cilan, Simisage let himself slide a bit. Slowing a fall gradually was much better than abruptly stopping it.

Cilan opened his eyes again as they came to a stop. He blinked and looked up at his Pokémon as

reality hit him. They were alive.

"You miraculous Pokémon!" Cilan cried out cheerfully as his feet set back on the ground. His legs felt like noodles, and he fell to his knees as he hugged the Pokémon close.

His senses caught up, and Cilan had to force himself not to cry. He had accepted his death in a sense, but now that he was alive, he thought that his acceptance was ridiculous.

"Sage," Simisage muttered, loosening his grip on Cilan only slightly. He was looking over towards the side of the mountain with confusion.

"What's—?" Cilan couldn't even get the question out. The mountain's wall exploded outward, sending massive boulders spiraling through the air. He threw himself over Simisage to protect him, squeezing his eyes tightly.

A blast of cold air rushed by him, along with a high pitched screech. Cilan's eyes snapped open and he looked around to see a very angry Articuno fly by. He blinked several times, and slowly let go of Simisage, who seemed just as confused.

There was no commotion from inside the newly formed opening like Cilan expected. His stomach twisted uncomfortably as he slowly crept forward, knowing that with such fierce battles still erupting throughout the Tree of Beginning, silence was a very bad thing.

The room was freezing, and it was clear that Articuno had gone head to head with its Mirage Counterpart. The one that burst out looked like the real one at a quick glance, but he had been too busy ducking out of the way to really see.

When his ears stopped ringing from the crash of the rocks exploding around him, he realized that he did hear a sound. It was the steady sound of metal hitting ice.

"Zu!"

"Veno!"

"Scyth!"

Cilan crept forward with Simisage at his side and gasped loudly at what he saw. He jolted forward, his own precarious situation forgotten. "Tracey!"

Azumarill, Venomoth and Scyther looked up at him with relief. Scyther had been trying to cut his trainer out of the ice that he was partially trapped in. Azumarill and Venomoth were cuddled close to the trainer.

Cilan knelt down beside Tracey and grimaced at how cold he was, but he was still breathing and that was the main thing. He eyed the ice that had trapped his left arm against the wall, and then the icy burns on his skin from the proximity of the attack.

"Okay," he muttered, glancing at the Pokémon. Simisage eyed the situation with concerned eyes, ready and waiting for his trainer's instructions. It occurred to Cilan that Azumarill and Venomoth were trying to share their body heat with their trainer so that he wouldn't freeze while he was unconscious.

Cilan eyed Scyther, who was so old and tired, and whose strikes were getting a bit off-course. Not wanting to be witness to an accidental amputation if he could help it, he carefully placed a hand on Scyther's shoulder. "We'll get him out. Why don't you stay with the other three and keep him

warm?" The fact that the old, proud Pokémon instantly gave into his words spoke to how tired he actually was.

"Okay," he repeated again, reaching for Audino's Pokéball. "We're going to heal all the Pokémon up so we can use them to get him out." Surely Tracey's Kadabra would be able to help, or his Smeargle, which could learn any type of move. Either way, more warm bodies would be a plus to them either way.

Cilan wasn't sure if he'd be able to save Tracey's arm, but Simisage had saved his life, and now he was going to pay that forward as best as he could.

...

It had been rather cold when they first got to the Tree of Beginnings, the fall coolness taking over the air. Yet there May was, sweat dripping from her forehead, her skin red from her cheeks down to her neck and chest. She was sure that she smelled awful and looked even worse, with the dirt, blood and bruises on her. Along with her brother, who had a similar look to him, she was sure that they were a sight to behold.

Yet, she didn't care.

She remembered back when Dialga and Palkia were attacking, how she fought Baron Alberto to stop his plot from unfurling (that, and he got her angry), and how proud she had been of herself. She had that same feeling now, but perhaps even stronger.

It wasn't a surprise that Max's Pokémon had been defeated. Her brother was intelligent, and a good trainer, but he was relatively young and inexperienced, especially against two women who had nothing to lose and no rulebook to play by.

Yet there she stood, Blaziken on one side of her, Altaria on the other, looming over the two women, who were actually cowering back from her. It was wild power trip, one that May was sure she would have taken advantage of back when they were in Sinnoh.

She thought of how disappointed Drew would have been in her thoughts and actions back then, and how much disapproval he would have been showing her right now. Even more than that, she thought about how disappointed she was in her past self.

May wasn't about to make that same mistake.

"How many devices for Mirage Pokémon do you have here?" she asked, narrowing her sapphire eyes at Annie and Oakley.

"And Pokéball jammers," Max added.

"Right. And Pokéball jammers," she agreed.

"Like we'd tell you brats anything," Annie spat at her.

"We beat you," May pointed out, including Iris in her thoughts, since the other girl had certainly done a lot of damage prior to them.

"That means nothing. You're little kids. You're going to just let us walk away, because you don't have what it takes to make the real choices in life," Oakley pointed out smugly.

The choice to kill them if they didn't answer.

May felt Max grip her hand, her two Pokémon rustling on either side of them unhappily.

"They might not, but I do."

How quickly both women went pale was absolutely astounding. May whipped around, shoving Max behind her and glaring at the newcomer. Her glare softened slightly when she recognized Red, but not entirely. Ash and Dawn were her friends, and he had treated them horribly. She could forgive a lot, but not that.

"You two," Red said, nodding at the Maple siblings, "go back down."

"What?" Max exclaimed in shock, as if Red had no right to tell them to do such a thing. May was kind of inclined to agree with her brother.

"More of your friends are below," he answered simply. "They could probably use you more than anyone else above could." He turned his attention back to Annie and Oakley, and muttered something quietly to them that made both women pale.

At one point in time, May would have accepted that as some sort of compliment, but she caught the back-handedness of it. He was saying that they'd get in his way while still trying to keep them useful.

She opened her mouth to argue, when the ground shook beneath their feet. Red jerked back, throwing himself on top of May and Max to push them to the ground and shield them. In that moment, May could very easily see Ash in Red, and she got the distinct feeling that they were getting a very brief glance at a Master Red before tragedy, crushing responsibility, and politics got to him.

The shaking stopped, and May blinked her eyes open. Looking up, she realized that Blaziken and Altaria had hovered over them as well as an added layer of protection.

Red got to his feet, and May heard a few of his bones crack from strain. He looked around, and she saw a very brief look of disgust on his face before he shook his head and looked back to him. "You two okay?"

May looked at Max, who nodded his head, stunned by what had just happened.

"Good, now go down. If you go down that path there," he pointed to a cave not far from them, "You should be able to avoid most of the fighting."

"What? But we can help!" Max protested, sounding rather upset. "We promised Ash that we'd help him."

Red narrowed his eyes at him before slowly nodded behind him. "And dying won't help him at all. Go down farther. Maybe you can help below."

May's gaze followed the direction Red had nodded in. She instantly felt bile creeping up her throat when she saw that a piece of the ceiling had caved in, crushing Annie and Oakley below it. She instantly spun around so that she was looking away and grabbed Max so that he wouldn't see it.

"May! What are you—?"

"Let's go!" she demanded, and started pushing him away with Blaziken and Altaria on either side of her. She was desperately trying to prevent her brother from seeing what she had seen, but he wasn't making it easy. "Stop squirming!"

"Not until you tell me..." Max trailed off, and she realized that he had seen the gruesome sight behind them, since he didn't protest at all to her pushing them along. May didn't realize that Red waited until they were in the tunnel before hurrying in the opposite direction.

May and Max ran as quickly as they could, until Max's feet ending up slipping out from under him as frost covered the stone floor. He stumbled, scraping his leg and palm on some of the loose crystals.

"Max!" May dropped to her knees beside him, Altaria and Blaziken hovering around them anxiously. "Are you okay?"

"They weren't good people at all, but they didn't deserve that," Max choked out, not at all focused on himself.

May wanted to argue with her brother, that they could have very well deserved what they had gotten. She had seen only too closely what some members of Team Rocket, and the others, were willing to do to ensure a victory. At the sight of his watery eyes though, she found that she couldn't do it.

"Maybe not," she conceded, even if she didn't really believe it. "But we can't stop to think about it. We have to keep going."

May almost fell, but Altaria grabbed her and kept her on her feet, and in turn, she grabbed Max. Then the entire mountain shook, and this time they all fell to the floor, even Altaria. The two Pokémon shielded the siblings, until the rumbling stopped.

"What do you think happened?" Max asked his sister, brown eyes wide with concern.

May felt her stomach twist. "Nothing good. Come on, maybe we should get farther down."

Max wanted to protest, but it died on his lips when he realized that she was right. Something was desperately wrong above them, and he wasn't really looking forward to find out what that was.

Keeping Blaziken and Altaria out, May helped her brother up and the two continued on their way down the tunnel.

"Why is it so cold?" she mumbled, more to herself than anything else. A second later, her feet slipped out from under her yet again, but Blaziken caught her. "Why does this keep happening? Thanks."

"It shouldn't be frozen like this," Max mumbled, still clearly upset, but trying to focus on the issue at hand.

As they approached a cavern, May crept forward first, peaking around the quiet corner to see what was there. She gasped and bolted forward, startling her brother. "Cilan! Tracey!" She heard her Pokémon and her brother run after her.

Cilan looked up at them as they approached, relief rushing across his face. The Pokémon were either trying to keep Tracey warm, or to chip the ice away from his arm. "May! Max! Are you both okay?" His green eyes locked onto Max's scratches. "Audino, can you heal those for him?"

"Di!" The Pokémon looked glum at first, but perked right up at the thought of being able to help someone. It went over to Max to heal his injuries.

"What happened?" May asked as she stared at Tracey with worried eyes.

"Articuno," Cilan answered simply enough. "Kadabra tried to use Psychic to move it off, but it hurt him too much, and Smeargle didn't learn any fire-type moves. So we've been slowly working away at it." He looked up towards Blaziken. "Do you think—?"

"Of course!" May twisted to look at her Pokémon. "Blaziken, can you melt this off of him? Be careful though."

Her Pokémon nodded and knelt down beside Tracey, the others backing away and watching eagerly as the ice started to turn into water and steam.

"How'd you get down here anyway?" May asked, staring at Cilan with confusion. "Red sent us down here, but you were higher up than we were, right? What happened to everyone else? I know Iris beat up a few people but..."

"Did she?" Cilan asked, clearly relieved. "I stayed behind to try and fight some guy that was controlling a Mirage Pokémon that Clemont and Bonnie were fighting a bit below us. I fell. Simisage saved me. I found Tracey."

"Is he going to be okay?" she asked, her attention turning back to Tracey.

"Will he live? Probably. Will his arm be 100 percent? Unlikely." Cilan grimaced when he saw the state of Tracey's hand. "When Pokémon attack in battles, they're not trying to be lethal, so if a human gets hit, they'll usually be okay. That's why Ash can get shocked and burned so many times. Articuno didn't care who she hit or how hard, from the looks of it. Who knows what type of damage was done."

May opened her mouth to talk when Altaria cried out angrily and Max stumbled backwards. "Guys?"

May and Cilan looked up, and she felt her stomach drop. A group of Rocket grunts had just rushed into the cave with their Pokémon, and now they were surrounded and outnumbered.

...

Clemont was in complete awe of his little sister. He still desperately wanted to be by her side, to shield her and protect her like he had promised his mother so long ago, but he was still amazed at how easily she commanded a legendary Pokémon, as well as Clemont's other ones (even though their electric-type attacks were useless). She was fierce and strong, reminding him so much of their late mother that it was almost painful.

Still, it wouldn't do to let her keep fighting on her own, so he stayed focused on what he was doing. His plan was to destroy the domes around them, which would hopefully get rid of the Mirage Zygarde.

He had managed to quickly splice together a crude machine that would send out a single pulse and hopefully destroy them. The problem came from the fact that he just didn't have time to refine it. The shockwave would most likely be a powerful one, and there was a chance at destroying the cavern.

The reality of the situation was that Mirage Zygarde wasn't going to tire, but the real one and his Pokémon easily could. They were eventually going to lose if he didn't do something.

Suddenly, one of Mirage Zygarde's attacks flew over the head of his Chesnaught, heading straight for his sister.

"Bonnie!" Clemont yelled, and tried to move, but just ended up hurting his ribs again. He grimaced and fell to his side, and could only watch the scene in slow-motion horror. His hand went to his device, and he hit the button to start it.

Then, out of nowhere, a surge of fire slammed into the attack, throwing it to the side and into a wall.

Debris and dust flew everywhere, and Clemont found himself hacking and coughing. It didn't matter how painful it was though, all he could think about was his sister.

A figure loomed over him, and he tensed up for a moment, before realizing that it was a Blaziken.

"May?" he wheezed out, figuring that she and Max had caught up.

"Kin!" Blaziken called out. A moment later, two more tall figures came crashing out of the dusty air.

Clemont belatedly realized that he had lost his glasses somewhere in the last couple minutes. Even so, he recognized both of the figures, and felt his heart leap up into his chest. "Dad!" The man must have come with the League.

Meyer rushed to his son's side, his Ampharos close behind him, Bonnie cradled in his arms, looking rather put-out at being dragged around. "Clemont, are you okay?"

"I've had better days," he managed to say.

Meyer knelt down next to him and set Bonnie down. She instantly grabbed a hold of him with her free arm, the other one holding Squishy in it tightly. "I was so scared that you got hurt."

"Me?" Clemont gaped at his sister, unable to believe what he was hearing. She had been worried for him. That was something else. "What about you? You were fighting—"

They all looked up as the Mirage Zygarde burst out of the rubble, hissing angrily. The Liscio family cringed back away, Blaziken and Ampharos standing protectively in front of them. The Mirage Zygarde reared back, and without warning, flickered out of existence.

Squishy made a confused sound, and Bonnie asked, "What?"

Clemont blinked and tried to figure out what had just happened. Someone must have destroyed the controller for that specific Mirage Pokémon. Then his heart leapt to his throat when he realized that he had already activated the device to destroy the domes that generated the Mirage Pokémon.

"Dad!" he cried out, but it was already too late, there was a whirring sound, and then a blast of energy that rocked the entire cavern. Meyer grabbed both of his children and held them close as the ceiling caved in.

...

Iris cringed at the sound Arceus made when he was struck down. She didn't have to see it to just know that it was what had happened. She barely managed to keep her footing as the entire cavern shook, destroying the highly weakened Mirage forms of Zekrom and Reshiram before the three Dragonite could.

"What just happened?" Clair called out to her cousin.

"Not sure," Lance answered, though he was clearly concerned about it.

"That was Arceus."

They looked around as Red all but stumbled into the room, not at all looking like the dignified Pokémon Master Iris had always pictured. He looked so tired, worn out, and just about done with everything. It kind of reminded her of Ash, though Iris was sure her friend would scowl at the comparison.

"Are you okay?" Lance asked the Master, reaching out to steady him.

"It's been a hell of a climb," he answered simply, and Iris was tempted to ask about her friends, but didn't. He probably wouldn't tell her much anyway. "Let's keep going. Giovanni's up top." He cast a wary glance at Iris.

"She's good to stay," Clair affirmed, but Red only seemed to accept it when Lance nodded his head.

Red didn't say anything else, living up to his name as a rather silent man as they proceeded forward.

Out of the corner of her eye, amongst the glowing, orange crystals, Iris saw movement, and instantly moved back towards her Dragonite. "Look out!"

Red threw himself out of the way just in time as one of the orange blobs shot forward. Lance managed to swing himself out of the way, his cape barely brushing against it. Clair wasn't so lucky.

She screamed as it slammed into her, surrounding her just like May had described to them briefly. Lance yelled in shock, as did Clair's Dragonite, and both tried to grab her and yank her out, but she was pulled inside too quickly, and vanished.

Dragonite grabbed Iris and flew into the air as Clair's own Pokémon cried out in anger and agony. Lance's large Dragonite grabbed both him and Red.

"It won't hurt him," Iris managed to choke out. "The Pokémon."

"No, but they're probably going to hurt us," Lance replied, looking at something over her shoulder.

Iris twisted around, and her stomach dropped when she realized that, on the ledges above them, they were surrounded by dozens of Pokémon-shaped blobs.

...

Serena stared down at where Proton had vanished down into the mist and shadows of the Tree of Beginning. She breathed out slowly, still in complete and utter shock over what had just happened. He chose to die rather than accept her help.

She pushed her hand against the rough rock of the cliff to move backwards, but the ground crumbled under her. She couldn't even scream as she pitched forward, the sound getting stuck in her throat. She managed to grab onto the side, the exposed skin of her legs scraping on the edge of the cliff as she wheeled around awkwardly. She breathed in and out heavily, her heart thumping wildly as she hung over a massive drop.

Despite knowing better, she still looked down and whimpered. She scrambled to find holes for her feet to get some of the strain off of her hands, and screamed when another set grabbed her arms. Looking up, Serena stared with wide eyes up at Dawn, who was holding onto her arms with a

determined expression.

"I'll get you up!" Dawn assured her.

"Your hands!" Serena called back to her.

That only seemed to infuriate the younger girl. "Seriously? You're hanging from a cliff and you're worried about my hands getting hurt more?" She tried to tug her up, but both girls froze as more rocks started to crumble.

After waiting for a moment, Dawn looked over her shoulder. "Hey! Can you help me out here?"

Serena blinked with surprise when James leaned over the edge to grab her arms and yank her up. The three of them quickly retreated from the edge before they could meet the same fate as Proton.

Serena inhaled sharply and looked up as her remaining Pokémon finally got back to her side, hovering around her protectively, and Dawn knelt in front of her. "Are you okay?"

Looking up at the younger girl, the blonde let out an almost hysterical laugh. She leaned forward, resting her forehead on Dawn's shoulder briefly as she took a few deep breaths. "I'm okay. Are you? What happened?"

"We beat Mirage Darkrai, but then a Mirage Cresselia showed up," Dawn admitted with a grimace. "She was too much for Darkrai, though he's okay now. Team Rocket saved me." She paused before looking at them. "I mean, Jessie, James, and Meowth did."

"Dat's right," Meowth agreed as he crossed his arms in front of him. "Don't compare us to dem." He pointed vaguely down the cliffs, but the point still stood.

Dawn nodded and looked at Serena. "What happened to you?"

"I fought with some guy who called himself Proton." She looked at Jessie, James and Meowth as all three grimaced. "You know him?"

"He's one of Giovanni's inner circle. The worst of the worst," James explained.

Jessie sounded unimpressed. "Others are Ariana, Petrel, Archer, Black Tulip, and a few others. They're as horrible and bloodthirsty as him." She looked away angrily, and Serena decided not to push it.

They heard the sudden sound of footsteps running towards them, and everyone tensed up. Serena and Dawn quickly leapt to their feet, staring in the direction the sound was coming from.

A moment later, Brock burst around the corner, Toxicroak at his side. He was panting as he came to a sudden stop when he saw them, his green shirt was gone, instead torn into pieces and wrapped around his obviously bleeding hands.

"Brock!" Dawn burst out and hurried over to him. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I fought with Domino," he answered, but left it at that. He raised an eyebrow at Jessie and James.

"They saved me, and then helped me save Serena," Dawn explained quickly, grabbing his hands and trying to hide a wince from using her own ones. "Let me look at your hands."

"No, Dawn," Serena said quickly, putting her hand on the girl's shoulder. It would be a bad idea to mix blood, just in case. With almost shy blue eyes, she looked up at the young man she was only

slightly familiar with. "May I?"

Brock's expression softened, and Serena got the impression that he was glad she stopped Dawn. He held his hands out, and she grimaced as she unwrapped the wound. "Brock..." To her, it looked like he had grabbed a knife. It had to be painful.

"I can stitch it." They all looked up at Jessie, who looked momentarily embarrassed. "I trained as a nurse once."

"And it's not like we can always get to a hospital," James added. "We learned to patch ourselves up."

It surprised Serena that Brock didn't hesitate, nodding his head. She supposed that he was training to be a doctor too, and knew how important it was to close a wound, especially in an environment like they were in.

"What happened up above?" Dawn asked as they all knelt down. "I know you said you fought Domino, and I get that Serena stayed here, but..." She watched as Jessie pulled a first aid kit out of her bag and went ahead with swabbing and disinfecting Brock's hands.

"Ash and Misty went ahead," Brock said with a shake of his head. He grimaced when Jessie started to stitch his hands. "I don't know anything. I tried to go up first, but it's pretty inaccessible. I imagine they took Charizard the rest of the way. It wouldn't be that dangerous since we're already up so high."

"So we can't get to them." Serena said, stating the obvious rather than asking him.

Brock shook his head and looked away from his hands when he was happy that Jessie was stitching it properly. "Not on foot."

"There," Jessie said, cutting the thread. She set aside the scissors and took out gauze to wrap around it for now.

"You're good at this. Maybe you should think about becoming a nurse after all this," he noted.

Jessie's face coloured slightly, and she smiled slightly. "Maybe. It might be nice to help people, rather than hurt them." James nodded his head in agreement.

A screech echoed through the air and they all cringed. The Pokémon that were out with them surrounded the group of people, and the five of them looked up the mountain just in time to see Arceus slam into it.

Brock moved quickly, releasing his Steelix, who wrapped around them all protectively. They all winced, hearing the sound of large rocks slamming into the Pokémon's side, but Steelix only grunted and held his ground.

Once the shaking and the falling boulders stopped, Steelix moved, and they all looked up in time to see the Mirage Arceus cry out in triumph.

Dawn's gloved hand was pressed against her mouth, eyes wide with shock. Jessie and James grabbed each other's hand. Brock took a step backwards, staring with horror.

"He's winning," Serena whispered in horror. "He's winning."

...

Ash focused so hard that he wouldn't be surprised at all if something inside of his head snapped. He could feel beads of sweat slipping down his face, and tried desperately to ignore the warm blood that drenched his hands. Though he had once saved Arceus from death, this was different. He hadn't seen or felt the blood leaving Arceus that time. It was different from feeling the life fade.

He desperately wished that he could feel the Aura pulsing through the Tree of Beginning, but that orange energy that seemed to be what Yung used to create his Mirage Pokémon in the first place had taken over. He could feel the Aura, but it was incredibly hard to touch, and would have strained him more than he could take right now.

For a brief moment, Ash wished that he had Ria with him as well, but an explosion and a roar from Gyarados above him reminded him why she was better off where she was.

"Come on," Ash grunted, focusing his Aura on the gaping wound that was very slowly closing. Too slowly, in his opinion. "Come on."

The Mirage Arceus cried out from above, and Ash briefly looked up to see that it had been brought down close to the mountain side, his Pokémon fighting off the creature. It wasn't faring quite as well, probably because Giovanni hadn't given it any instructions on what to do next. Misty, bless her heart, was keeping the boss of Team Rocket very distracted.

Arceus shifted, and Ash opened his eyes again. He watched as the last of the gruesome wound sealed itself, and fell back with a gasp. "Are you okay?" He panted out.

Arceus opened his eyes and looked at him. "You have saved my life once again, Chosen One." He lifted his head slightly and looked at the Mirage Arceus. "And your Pokémon battle bravely."

"You're not strong enough to fight him," Ash said, leaning slightly on his front leg, feeling the strange almost cloud-like fur under his head. He was so tired, and the thought of using his Aura again almost made him want to cry. He had never used it to such an extent before. Ash doubted that he could make even a tiny Aura Sphere at this point.

"Not as I am," Arceus agreed, his gaze slipping back to Ash. "You can help me with that. I can hold him off until you do with the help of your friends."

Ash understood. He stood up, wiping his bloody hands on his black shirt, though the colour didn't completely leave his skin. He took a deep breath, and a step forward, and instantly pitched towards the ground again, slamming to his knees and he threw up the little bit of food that he had in him. He heaved even when there was nothing left, sweating and shaking even more as the nausea rushed through him.

Arceus nudged him very gently. "You've never used so much Aura before. It's a life force, and you are limited to what's inside you, even if someone is as strong as you are. Do not fear, it will return eventually."

Eventually didn't really suit Ash right now. He had too much left to do. Taking a deep breath, he used the adrenaline that was still rushing through him, and pushed himself back up, making his way towards the ledge. Ash could feel Arceus' eyes on him, and he pushed himself as he started to climb back up.

He stopped when he got up to the level where Giovanni and Misty were, taking a brief moment to admire the way she commanded her Pokémon, as well as Ria, in battle against the incredibly powerful, fake Mewtwo. He could see Giovanni too, and the man looked more frustrated than he had ever seen before.

There wasn't time for that though. Despite the twisting of his stomach, Ash kept going up, again, stopping to check on his Pokémon. Pride rushed through him as he saw just how well the five of them were working together as a team.

Then Arceus shot up into the air. Ash almost wished he could still see Giovanni's face. The blinding golden light of his Judgment attack lit the air, and Ash's Pokémon all quickly scattered before the attack could hit them. It slammed into the Mirage Arceus, who in turn hit the side of the cliff. It was really a moment of poetic justice.

Ash reached the edge of the shrine and took a deep breath. Somehow, despite everything happening below him, it felt calm there. It felt like nothing could possibly go wrong.

Grabbing the bag, he made his way around the shrine, fingers brushing gently against the symbols etched in front of each one. He recognized these, and had to wonder if it was put there so he'd recognize it (somehow), or if the symbols for what they now call Pokémon types were discovered.

Ash shook his head. That was a question for Gary, but in order for there to be a future where Gary could answer it, he needed to stay focused.

He walked around the shrine, placing the glowing orbs in the correct spots. Unlike when he passed them off to other people, the glow didn't just stay, it actually got brighter. There were so many colours mixing together, that it almost just looked like white light. Normal, ground, steel, rock, fighting, grass, flying, poison, psychic, bug, dragon, ghost, dark, fairy, fire, electricity, and ice were all placed in their correct spots.

Taking another shuddering breath, Ash dropped the bag as he grabbed the Water Orb, the last one that he had to put down. He reached up with a shaking hand.

A piercing bang broke through the air, followed by a familiar, startled scream. Ash jumped and looked around, his brown eyes widening with panic.

"Ketchum! Come out from where you're hiding."

Ash hesitated when he heard Giovanni's voice. Somehow the man had gotten around both of the feuds going on below.

"Come out, or I'll blow the head off your pretty girlfriend. You know I'm not bluffing."

No, he wasn't bluffing. Ash knew very well that Giovanni had no problems with getting his hands dirty. With a pounding heart and shaking limbs, Ash slowly came around the corner of the shrine, looking down below him. He swore that he felt his heart come to a stop when he saw Misty struggling in the large man's arms, a gun pressed against her head. She looked positively furious.

"Good boy. Come down here and we'll have a chat. Everyone else is busy." Sure enough, Mirage Arceus was doing a good job at fending off all of Ash's Pokémon as well as the weakened real Arceus. The Mirage Mewtwo had Ria and Misty's Pokémon all distracted.

Slowly, Ash moved down from the shrine, so that he was on the same plateau as Giovanni and Misty. His scared, brown eyes met her furious, green ones, and she snapped, "Ash Ketchum! You better-!" Her words were cut off as Giovanni hit her with the gun, the metal against her skull clearly dazing her.

"Stop it!" Ash cried out, and he felt like he was going to throw up again. He felt like something was squeezing his lungs, and faintly realized that he was starting to feel the symptoms of an oncoming panic attack. Now was not the time for that, but he could still feel it creeping up.

"Arceus wants you to use that for some reason." Giovanni nodded at the orb in his hand. "I don't know what it will do, but I do know it's a risk for me. I will not be underestimating you again." He leveled the gun at Misty's head as the girl managed to get herself up right again, blinking with a bit of a daze. "You drop it, and she lives. You don't, she dies. Simple enough, yes?"

It took every ounce of will and self-control to not panic and break down, even if he desperately wanted to.

Far below them, Leaf sobbed over her mother's dead body as Gary held her. Cilan, May, and Max were desperately trying to help Tracey, along with warding off the other grunts. The cavern around Clemont, Bonnie, and their father caved in. Iris and Dragonite fell, unable to keep flying to avoid more of the orange creatures chasing them. Brock, Serena, Dawn, Jessie, James, and Meowth were watching the battle above in sheer horror.

Though her head was pounding horribly, Misty still managed to pull herself up straight. Giovanni may have gotten the jump on her (she was positive he mixed an almost lethal amount of steroids with whatever breakfast he had in the morning), but she was not going to let him think that he had completely beaten her.

Except, in that moment, she realized that the point wasn't to beat her at all. She was a pawn to him, and that made every inch of her bristle in anger. Her eyes snapped to Ash's as Giovanni laid out his terms, and what she saw made her want to crumble.

Ash was staring at her in obvious horror, not even trying to hide his thoughts and feelings. She could see the tears in his eyes, and that made hers tear up as well, and she really didn't want to cry.

"Go!" Misty yelled at him, though inwardly, a part of her was screaming for him to stay. She shoved that selfish part that had been dictating the majority of her decisions over the last couple months away, and squared her shoulders. "It's okay!" It wasn't, but she had to be brave. She wasn't going to let her final moments be as a frightened child.

She was not going to give anyone that satisfaction.

Ash stared at her, eyes darting from the gun, to the orb in his hand, back to her. Misty knew he would turn and run back to the shrine. Ash was the Chosen One that Arceus had always needed, always putting the world ahead of an individual. She accepted this. She embraced this.

Misty didn't want to die, but she wasn't arrogant. Her life was not worth everyone else's. Maybe Giovanni would be successful in creating his own world and rule under the Mirage Arceus, but it was bound to be a short, painful world that would destroy everyone. Ash wouldn't let that happen.

Ash stared at her, and her breath caught in her throat as the Water Orb slipped from his hand and fell to the ground with a clank that somehow seemed louder than the battles around them. Misty watched as Ash's legs shook and gave out, though his eyes never left them.

"Fine. You win. Let her go."

Misty's mouth fell open and she could almost feel Giovanni's shock as well. Clearly neither one of them were expecting that answer.

Her heart raced wildly as it hit her what he had just done. He had chosen her. Ash freaking Ketchum, Chosen One extraordinaire, had chosen her over not just one other person, or two, he had potentially just chosen her over everyone. He had chosen her over Arceus.

Tears fell down Misty's cheeks and she wanted to hug him and kiss him, and never ever let him go,

because he had just chosen her over everyone. Just as much though, she really wanted to kick him in the face, because he had just chosen her over everyone.

Anger rushed through the teenage girl, and she moved on autopilot without thinking her actions out. She dropped to her knees and pushed herself backwards, flipping Giovanni over her shoulder and then kicking the gun out of his hand.

"Pick it up!" She screamed at Ash. "Pick up the orb!"

"Mist—"

"Don't you 'Mist' me!" She really wanted to stop crying, but she didn't think that she could. "You don't get to do this."

"I can't. I told you before. I can't pick them anymore."

He had told her that he would pick her before, hadn't he? She didn't really hold much stock in that at the time. Now she did and once again she felt so happy and angry at the same time. She didn't even know how to describe what she was feeling.

"I know you pick me, and I love you for that, but I'm picking everyone else." She shook her head wildly and turned around to kick Giovanni again when he started to move. Misty wanted so much to go and hug him but she wasn't sure if she'd cling to him or throw him off the cliff at this point so it was better to stay away since either situation would be a hindrance right there. "He does not get to decide what happens to me. Neither do you. So I'm picking everyone else. I'm picking Arceus. You pick up that orb and get back up to that shrine while I deal with this asshole." She saw him hesitate. "Go!"

If he didn't go, she'd probably just completely give into her tears because she was so overwhelmed that it wasn't even funny. She needed him to go and do his job while she stayed there to keep Giovanni in check.

Ash met her eyes, and slowly nodded his head. He was dazed from the panic that was only starting to fade, along with the other emotions that slammed into him like a tsunami.

Reaching forward, he grabbed the Water Orb and forced himself to look away from Misty, because he wasn't sure he'd find the strength to leave if he kept staring at her. Ash knew that she was right. He had no right to decide her fate, but he couldn't help himself. He couldn't lose anyone else if he had the choice.

So he ran. He ran as fast as he could up the rocks and around the shrine, practically slamming the water orb into the spot. He took a step back and waited.

Nothing happened.

Ash's heart stopped beating and he stared at the shrine with wide eyes. The panic coming back. He remembered Lugia's song, and wondered if there was something he was supposed to do. Was he supposed to sing? If it had to be good, they were all screwed. He couldn't sing to save his life.

A faint, almost peaceful cry drifted up from Arceus, and the orbs exploded into light. Ash took a step backwards, shielding his eyes as he watched them all soar up into the air, creating a ball of pure, white light above them. It was almost blinding to look at, but he couldn't tear his gaze away.

The light started to shrink and descend, compacting more and more in a way that shouldn't have been possible, and the light started to fade.

Ash blinked several times as a completely clear orb floated down in front of him, white light dancing inside. He slowly reached out, staring at it and wondering exactly what he was supposed to do with yet another orb. The second he touched it though, Ash almost jerked away. He was so overwhelmed by the feel of it, that it was physically hard to stay near it.

Then he saw a shimmer of rainbow inside of it, and he knew exactly what it was. Ash's mouth fell open and he realized just why it was kept hidden in such a way, and why Arceus himself couldn't control it.

A loud bang made him jump, and once again, he ran around the shrine, a sinking feeling of déjà vu hitting him as he mentally hoped it was exactly like what had happened moments before.

It wasn't.

Misty stood a few meters away from Giovanni, her hands were pressed against her abdomen, shock on her face as red stained her hands and shorts. Giovanni stood in front of her, grinning madly.

Misty stumbled back, and Ash couldn't remember moving. The only thing he knew was that he was on the ground beside her, pulling her up into his arms and staring at the wound on her stomach that was gushing blood.

"No, no, no," Ash kept mumbling to himself as he pressed his hand over hers. Misty hissed in pain. "It's okay. It'll be okay. I'll heal it."

"Ash," Misty mumbled, staring at him as he shifted her in his arms. It was uncomfortable, but everything was a little bit more than uncomfortable at the moment. Her wound was absolutely agonizing, and it took everything she had not to scream and cry.

Ash closed his eyes and seemed to strain, but nothing was happening. A moment later, his eyes snapped open again. "I can't heal it. I can't...I used all my...for Arceus...oh gods."

Misty let go of the wound and Ash held it even tighter. She wiped the blood off a bit, and reached up, pressing her palm against his cheek. She wanted to tell him that it would be okay, that it would be fine, but fear surged through her.

She was going to die.

Misty had no strong words to offer him, just a bubbling sob that tasted of iron. Her hands gripped him as he kept trying to heal her. Tears fell down her cheeks. "Ash. I'm scared."

He tensed up and then brought one hand up to her cheek, the other one staying firmly on the wound that hurt so much she still wanted to scream. "I know." Misty kind of appreciated that he wasn't telling her to not be afraid. "I'm here."

That was good. She didn't want to die alone, and that was really the only thing he could offer at the moment.

"I watched Red find your aunt," Giovanni spoke up, startling them both since they honestly forgot he was there. He was watching them so smugly. "I made sure I had a way to see what my mother had done. I watched as he pulled her from the water and sobbed over her body. This is even more satisfying."

Misty didn't want to hear him, leaning her face into the crook of Ash's neck so that she could feel his pulse. He was still alive, and that was good. That was important. He was going to destroy Giovanni once she died.

She could feel his tears dripping on her, and had no doubt that he could feel hers on his neck. She shifted a bit, and the pain that lanced through her made her wonder why that type of wound had to work so slowly and painfully, rather than quickly. The waiting made her want to throw up.

Misty opened her eyes just in time to see Ash's tears drip by her, and land on the keystone around her neck. She blinked sluggishly as the stone began to glow, light at first, but brighter and brighter until it was pure white. She had never seen it change that colour before.

"Ash."

He looked down at her immediately, freezing at the sight of the stone. Mega Gyarados turned back into normal, and time and space itself seemed to freeze as the orb that Ash had hastily tossed into his pocket exploded with light.

He grasped the keystone, and looked up as the orb in his pocket flew out and hovered in the air. Arceus flew above them and leaned forward, touching the orb.

This time, he did have to look away because the light was so intense. When he opened them again, Arceus was gone, and everything was calm.

Except, Arceus wasn't gone. Ash could literally feel him everywhere and in everything. Ash could feel him in the stones, in the crystals, in the air, in the Pokémon, hell, he even felt him within himself. It was the single most unnerving thing that he had ever experienced through Aura and there was nothing he could do to escape it.

Arceus had told him a story once, about how he once existed without a physical form. Of course, his mega evolution wasn't something that they could see. This was something similar to the power he had at the beginning of time, but Ash also remembered Arceus saying he would never get it back entirely. He looked down at the glowing keystone. Of course. Arceus couldn't reunite all the orbs so he couldn't bring a reign of vengeance upon the world when he felt like it. Ash was the only one that could put it together. He also bet that he could take it back apart too.

The Aura around Ash started to pulse and suddenly, the domes that gave the mirage system their life started to explode and disintegrate. He could feel the power rushing everywhere. Fixing and destroying everything in its path.

Giovanni roared in anger as the Mirage Pokémon vanished, and Ash realized exactly what Arceus was doing. He was destroying everything that Giovanni had created. Without even asking the question, he could feel Arceus' confirmation within himself that it was exactly what the Pokémon was doing.

It would have taken years for them to completely dismantle the Mirage System, let alone setting things semi-right with the legendary Pokémon again. They wouldn't have been able to keep up with the disasters that would have followed. Humanity and Pokémon would have died out first. Arceus was literally the only one that could fix it.

Misty whimpered slightly, and he instinctively tried to reach out with his Aura again but that same sick feeling rushed over him. Frantically, he realized that she was looking very pale, and her pulse was getting a bit slow.

"Please," Ash begged suddenly. "Please Arceus. She chose to save you, not me. I didn't. I failed. Misty chose you. Please save her. Not for me. For her. Please."

"Ash," Misty mumbled tiredly.

He felt the energy around them shift, and Misty watched him tense up. He looked up suddenly as footsteps approached, Red and Lance appearing. They both approached Giovanni.

'Her life energy has almost rejoined the world's,' Arceus' voice mumbled inside of Ash's head.

"Please."

'You must do one thing for me,' Arceus said sternly.

Ash wanted to scream and cry, to say he'd done enough, but his pride wasn't the point here. If Arceus wanted him to grovel, he'd grovel in Misty's place since she was too weak to do so.

"Pikachu!" Pikachu cried out in alarm when he finally saw them. He dashed over, followed by the other Pokémon.

"I can't heal her," Ria said as she approached, sounding horrified with herself. Ash could feel just how tired she was, just like him. She could barely walk straight, let alone heal such a bad wound, especially when healing wasn't exactly Ria's specialty.

"It'll be okay," he choked out in a whisper, and carefully shifted and nodding to Ria. The Lucario knelt on the ground, and Ash gently set Misty's head on the Pokémon's lap. Misty grabbed for him, but he shook his head. "I'll be right back." He looked at the Pokémon. "Keep pressure on her wound, okay?" Pikachu and Marill nodded, and both held Misty's side as the green-eyed girl stared at Ash in horror. Ria bowed her head and closed her eyes.

He smiled weakly as he pushed himself to his feet and turned his attention to Giovanni, who was on in knees, the picture of pure defeat. It was almost anticlimactic, really.

'I will heal her. She was my warrior when you couldn't be. But even in this form, I cannot disrupt the aura cycle as I once could,' Arceus' words echoed through Ash's mind.

Red and Lance looked up at him, and he slowly approached them and Giovanni. For once, Red actually seemed concerned.

"Ash? Are you okay?" Lance asked him, frowning as he took a step towards the teenager.

Using the strength Arceus pushed into him, Ash held his hand up quickly, and a hastily made Aura Shield threw Lance and Red back, away from Giovanni.

The man looked up at him as Ash approached. A smirk appeared on his lips. "What do you plan on doing? I will escape any jail cell you put me in."

"Your mother's alive," Ash said. He slowly reached out his hand, ignoring Giovanni's startled expression that turned into alarm when he could suddenly see his own, ugly and violent aura around him. Ash's flared to life as well, bright and warm like a raging fire despite his exhaustion. It had to be Arceus helping him.

'We can replace the gap that would be made by returning her aura to her with that of another. You must do it for me.'

Ash's fingers curled around Giovanni's aura like it was something physical he could hold onto. It was to him. He ignored the startled cries of Lance and Red.

'Much like you once robbed the life from the grass beneath your feet, you can do it to another.'

Ash slowly started to pull back.

'Take his aura from him. Take his life, and you shall have hers back.'

It wasn't even a choice.

Ash suddenly pulled back on the energy roughly, ripping it from Giovanni. Instantly, the man went silent and fell forward, and Ash let the energy go. It swirled into the air before vanishing.

Everything was silent, until Misty screamed behind him. Ash jumped and ran back to her, and that sound seemed to spur Red and Lance into movement too. They hurried towards Giovanni as Ash ran back to the redhead.

Misty was twisting with agony on the ground, and Ash watched with almost morbid fascination as the bullet was forced out of her body and the wound began to seal itself. She opened her teary eyes and reached out to him.

Ash was instantly beside her, holding her up as she shook in pain, gasping for breath as Arceus healed her.

'She will be weak, but she will not die.'

"Thank you," Ash choked out as he hugged Misty.

"What?" she muttered.

"You're going to live. Arceus saved you."

Misty stared up at him, uncomprehendingly, before she laughed and nuzzled her face into his shirt and Ash could feel how relieved that she was. He hugged her close as their Pokémon surrounded them.

They both looked up as Red approached them, his face grim. "Giovanni's dead."

Ash grimaced a bit and nodded his head.

"You killed him."

Another nod, this one much more reluctant. Ash looked down at the keystone that was still glowing around Misty's neck. He could still feel Arceus, and knew that he would have fixed everything almost instantaneously. It was ridiculous how simple the solution turned out to be.

He touched the stone, and the light died away. There was a burst of light in the air above them, and Arceus' presence that was everywhere and in everything condensed back into one, singular form. The white orb hovered in the air before spitting into eighteen again, each of them vanishing one at a time.

"It was my will," Arceus spoke to Red simply. "You will not punish him." There was really no arguing with God, especially when he just saved the world.

"No wounds on him anyway," Lance spoke up from where he hovered over Giovanni. "Who'd believe us?"

Misty moved slightly in Ash's arms, and he looked down at her. She took Pikachu and Marill into her arms and looked up at Arceus. "Is it over?"

Arceus looked down at her almost tenderly, reminding Ash that, despite the fact that he was the Chosen One, he would have let the world end. She was the one that had saved it.

"Yes."

Ash inhaled sharply and buried his face in Misty's hair, holding her close with one hand and putting his other one on Pikachu's head. Ria and the others shifted closer to them in a protective circle.

It was over.

Chapter End Notes

Til next time,

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

When The World Begins Again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Ritchie bounced in his seat excitedly, wide blue eyes staring directly at Ash's bright brown ones. "So you take on Kalos, and I'll take Sinnoh, and then after we win, it'll be a race to see who can beat Master Red." His lips twitched up in a smile. "I mean, we both know it'll be me—"

"Yeah right," Ash replied quickly with a laugh, leaning on his elbow on the desk in front of him as he stared at the screen. "You may have beat me the first time around, but you watch, I'll take you out this time."

With a hearty laugh, Ritchie leaned towards the screen and shook his head. He clenched his fist. "Let's make a promise. We won't stop, and some day, we'll face each other for the title, no matter who gets there first!"

Ash could hear Clemont, Serena, and Bonnie coming, and knew it was time to get going. Still, he nodded his head eagerly and clenched his own fist. "That's a promise!"

...

Ash stared out the window towards the rising sun. It was amazing, just how peaceful it not only looked, but felt as well. The air felt right again, but to him, it was still so very wrong. It was like he still expected everything to go wrong, like the sun was about to just drop out of the sky.

The vehicle that they were in went over a bump, and Misty grunted from her spot beside him. Her face scrunched up, eyes fluttering open to look around in confusion. She blinked up at Ash and asked, "Where are we?"

"They went around Cerulean," he answered, keeping his voice low, since Dawn was still sleeping opposite of Misty, Brock snoozing in the passenger seat with Pikachu on his lap as a G-Men agent drove the vehicle they were in. "I think they're going to Viridian City, since Pewter was pretty damaged too."

Still entirely too pale to be good, Misty nodded slightly and eyed him. "How are you?"

He blinked at her words this time, and a very small smile appeared on his face. He rested his arm around her, and said, "I'm alive."

Misty nodded in understanding. It might seem like such a vague statement to anyone else, but she got it. There was really nothing else he could say without lying. He wasn't okay, but it wasn't as bad as before.

They weren't running for their lives anymore, but they were still in survival mode. Hopefully that would go away when they actually saw that they were safe now.

"I can hear the gears creaking from here," Misty muttered, tapping the side of his head gently.

"I was thinking about the last time I talked to Ritchie," he admitted, looking away from her and out the window again.

"Yeah?" she prompted, not wanting to pry too much, but opening it up for him to continue if he wanted.

"I made a promise." He didn't want to get into it beyond that. Instead, Ash shifted, and rested his cheek on the top of her head.

She nodded her head, and then looked over slightly when Dawn ended up slumping onto her. Misty slung her arm around Dawn's shoulder, holding the younger girl close and closing her eyes.

"Try to get a bit of rest," Misty whispered to Ash, and he nodded slightly. He was sure that, though the danger of Team Rocket had passed, things weren't about to settle down and be peaceful just yet.

...

The hospitals in Viridian City were all madhouses. With Pewter City filled, Cerulean City still in ruins that Arceus hadn't fixed, it was the closest one to the Tree of Beginning. Hence, that was where the injured were taken. The ones in need of immediate care were transported by helicopter, but everyone else was driven.

Meyer grimaced at the sight of his son being wheeled away. When the cavern collapsed around them, Clemont had been knocked out. Combined with his previous injuries, he was one of the ones to be carted off rather quickly.

The man had also seen that nice boy, Tracey Sketchit, get wheeled in earlier. None of Clemont's other friends were there though, which could either be good or really, really bad.

Bonnie, who he refused to leave behind, held onto him tightly as they waited to hear about Clemont. She suddenly jerked in his arms, eyes going wide as she twisted and flailed to get away from him.

"Ash!" He let her go and looked around as she took off like a shot, rushing across the room and practically throwing herself at the black-haired teenager. Dedenne followed her closely, and Pikachu hopped off of Ash's shoulder as he bent over slightly to hug Bonnie. Pikachu spoke to Dedenne softly, his ears falling a bit.

Ash's other friends began walking in, and Meyer couldn't help but grimace at the state of them. All of them were bloody and bruised. All of them were wary. He wanted to wrap every single one of

them up into a giant hug and let them cry.

Meyer also saw that Misty, Ash's girlfriend, was leaning on him pretty heavily and looked fairly pale. That apparently came to the attention of a nearby nurse, who ushered the redhead off. Brock was led away fairly quickly when it was revealed that his hands were a mess, but had been treated on the field.

What really caught Meyer's attention was the girl with honey blonde hair who quickly made her way towards Bonnie, calling out the little girl's name while moving. Bonnie looked up, and instantly launched herself at Serena, who dropped down to her knees to hug the girl.

The two of them rose up, Serena holding Bonnie's hand as they walked towards him. The teenage girl stared up at him with tired eyes and asked, "Is Clemont okay?"

"My boy's stronger than most people give him credit for," Meyer assured her. "I got an update a little while ago that he was doing well. They had to reset the bone in his leg, but he should be okay." His brown eyes flashed with worry. "You look about ready to drop on your feet. Sit with Bonnie. I'll get you a drink or some food."

"Oh, you don't have—"

"Let me."

Serena flushed slightly and nodded her head. Meyer watched the girl sit with his daughter, and left to go find both of them a drink, eyeing Clemont's other friends as he walked by. Most of them were waiting to be checked out.

He couldn't help but feel like he had failed them. He was an adult, yet they were the ones to fight their way through impossible odds, traveling all over the world, to finally save the day.

The least he could do was make sure they were hydrated.

...

Tracey grimaced as he moved his arm. He sighed, slightly thankful that it wasn't his right arm, so he could still draw. If that was what he wanted to do with his life. The only thing that he knew was that he wanted to put some distance between himself and the Pokémon League. He valued being Professor Oak's assistant, but he just wanted to be away for a bit.

He looked up at the knock on the door, a bit surprised to see Misty walk in. She looked a little pale, and really tired, but overall, she looked okay and that was what mattered. He raised an eyebrow at the redhead and said, "I thought you'd be with Ash."

She rolled her eyes, sitting in the chair beside his bed and glancing to the other bed in the room where people were resting or talking to family. "He insisted on waiting until the rest of us were treated before going in himself, so he's getting checked out now."

Tracey stared at her oddly. When she spoke, it wasn't with that familiar, subtle affection she normally did when it came to Ash. Instead, she sounded almost strained.

He didn't want to get into someone else's relationship, but he was bored, and she probably needed to talk, so he asked, "You okay?"

"I..." Her stubborn expression quickly faded away, and she started fiddling with the keystone around her neck. "I guess it's just...Ash literally picked me over the rest of the world. I don't...I

don't know what to do with that. It's...it's just—"

"What do you mean picked you?" Tracey asked slowly.

Misty looked at the floor. "Giovanni got the best of me. Had a gun to my head. He told Ash to drop the orb or he'd shoot me."

"And Ash dropped it." Tracey couldn't hide his surprise.

"Ash dropped it," she confirmed. "I just...I was so mad. I yelled at him then I told him to put the orb back and I fought with Giovanni and got away. I was shot later anyway but still, Ash picked me and yeah I was mad but how can I really be mad over that? It's just so...overwhelming? Flattering? I don't know." She shrugged helplessly.

"Wait, you got shot?" Tracey asked, staring at her with alarm.

Misty lifted the clean, blue shirt slightly so he could see her abdomen, where there was a nasty scar. "Ash...begged Arceus to save me. He couldn't use his own Aura to do it. Said that I was the one that picked to help Arceus, not him. I don't...remember what happened really, but it must have worked."

"So Ash chose you over the world, you chose the world over yourself, Ash pointed this out to God to save you? I got that right?" He got the distinct feeling that people would think that their story was badly written fiction if it ever went on paper. Or badly written fanfiction of badly written fiction. That could happen too.

Tracey could also acknowledge that he needed more sleep.

"You're allowed to be freaked out, to not know what you feel. You almost..." He trailed off. "You almost died."

"So did you," Misty replied.

He nodded his head a bit. "You know...some part of me thinks that maybe if I had, I would be with her right now," Tracey admitted. "I'm not suicidal, I'm not going to do anything, but I can't get the thought out of my head."

"I thought that for a minute too," Misty said quietly. "I thought that it would be better if I went. I'd be with my sisters, my grandma, my parents, my aunt...and I wouldn't be a distraction anymore." She sighed. "I'm grateful to be here though. I won't complain. What right do I have, when so many did lose their lives?"

"True," Tracey agreed. "So, what's next for Misty Waterflower then?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe go home and try to help fix things but I—" Misty was cut off as the door suddenly slammed open, startling the others in the room as well. She and Tracey looked around, and both of them immediately froze.

Standing at the door, staring at them with panicked, almost wild, sea-green eyes, was Daisy Waterflower.

Misty slowly stood up, eyes fixed on her sister as her mouth fell open. Tracey was sure that he stopped breathing, and his heart stopped beating.

The blonde woman they were both staring at lunged forward. "Tracey! Misty!" She threw her arms

around both of them at the same time. "I saw Tracey's name here so I came to check but oh my gosh, Misty, I'm so happy to see you!"

"Daisy?" Misty said, her voice low and shaky.

Daisy pulled back and nodded her head, putting her hands on Misty's cheeks as their identical eyes started to water. Tracey watched as they hugged each other again tightly, Misty's shoulders starting to shake slightly.

Misty let go of Daisy abruptly, gasping in shock. She was staring over her older sister's shoulder, and Tracey followed her gaze to see exactly what had startled her.

Lily and Violet were standing at the door with wide girls on their faces, tears in their eyes. Violet's stomach was so round that she looked ready to pop at any moment.

"Lily? Violet?" Misty said, standing up and taking a step towards them. "How?"

"Vi totally had a really bad craving, and so, like, we both decided to go with her to get that triple chocolate caramel milkshake from that little 24-hour diner outside the city," Lily explained as she squeezed Misty. "We saw what happened, but were sent off to a refugee camp."

Violet, who looked ready to burst, her stomach was that big, smiled and patted the bump. "My little man saved our lives that day."

Misty couldn't hold it in. She started to sob, practically clinging to Violet and Lily. She had always been a little closer to Daisy, but even in the back of her mind, Misty knew that her eldest sister had something else to do too.

Daisy smiled warmly before turning around to face Tracey, taking Misty's abandoned seat.

She smiled brilliantly, but then frowned at his arm in a thick sling. She took a step forward and placed her hand on it, lifting it when he winced. "What happened?"

"I—" Tracey had no idea what to say. He had gone months thinking that she was dead, yet here she was, completely healthy, and very much alive. "It doesn't matter." He reached out his good arm and tugged her close. Daisy wrapped her arms around him, hiding her face in his shoulder.

As Tracey hugged her close, and watched Misty sob with her other two sisters, he knew exactly what he wanted to do. He was going to go wherever Daisy went, even if that meant staying close to the Pokémon League via her gym. He wasn't going to let go ever again.

...

"...A press representative made a statement claiming that the Pokémon League, with the help of Arceus himself, was responsible for the fall of Team Rocket, and that their focus now is fixing the damage that—"

"...When asked, Champion Diantha Carnet of Kalos made it very clear that she still stands behind her decision to remain out of the conflict despite being a League Region. The President of Kalos has mirrored this sentiment—"

"...Champion Alder Ray of Unova insists that there was no way to avoid the battles, as two factions of Team Plasma fought one another for control. The Unovian President has stated that part of the fault must rest within the leadership of the Pokémon League. It raises to question the thought that the Pokémon League may have too much power for a single organization—"

"...Champion Wallace Reyes has insisted that the fighting between Team Magma and Team Aqua has ceased. Former Champion Steven Stone backed this statement up in an earlier statement—"

"...We're focusing on search and rescue at the moment. This was horrible tragedy, and how it was able to come about must be investigated. I for one won't stand until it is." Cynthia's eyes stared intensely at the camera. "We cannot let fear control us, but letting this go for the sake of peace is highly ignorant as well. Someone has to answer for this."

"...We have yet to receive a statement directly from Kanto-Johto Champion, Lance Greyson, or Pokémon Master Red—"

Lance sighed, his shoulder slumping slightly at Cynthia's statement. He almost felt like she was talking to him, but he knew the reality of her statement. She was very clearly talking to Red. He shifted in his chair slightly and motioned towards the monitors. "What do you want to do about this?"

Red was clearly unimpressed as his eyes scanned each screen. While keeping his gaze locked on the monitors, he said, "We need to do an assessment of the Indigo Plateau."

"I—what?" The Champion was genuinely startled by this.

"I doubt Team Rocket damaged the infrastructure much. It was worth more standing than in ruins," Red continued as if Lance hadn't said anything, his expression thoughtful. "We're going to need a big area to make a big statement."

"What kind of statement are you thinking of?"

Red's eyes flashed with an old determination. "That Team Rocket's temper tantrum didn't destroy us. That we're stronger and better than ever. I'm not saying we ignore the damage. I'm saying that we prove that they haven't destroyed our spirits and morals."

Lance leaned back slightly in his chair, looking thoughtful. "I mean, it's a good idea, but you have to acknowledge that the last time something even remotely close to this happened, we changed the way the entire League works. Who's to say another change won't be called for?"

Red shook his head. "Kanto's Prime Minister got the boot due to his allegiance with Team Rocket. That whole sector is a mess because of that. They need something stable. Maybe in the future, but not right now. That's why we need to show that stability, that no matter what, we weren't broken."

"I guess I'll follow your lead on this one," Lance decided, before tapping the table in front of him. "Either way, everyone's eager to start persecuting the people we have, the ones Arceus left us with, at least. There's been a lot of questions about Giovanni though."

Red's shoulders tensed. "What kind of questions?"

"Medics who looked him over have no idea how he died," the Champion answered seriously. "He was perfectly healthy and just dropped. What are we going to do about that? We both know Ash killed him."

"Like Arceus said, there's no physical evidence," Red pointed out. "Just like you said. The only thing that exists are two witnesses: you and me, and Arceus made his position on the matter very clear. We already agreed that we were going to keep the involvement of the kids as pretty much just footnotes. They don't deserve the backlash we're bound to get. That includes the fact that Ash has Aura. I don't want that documented anywhere."

"Some might argue it gives him an unfair advantage in a League match," Lance noted, but from his skeptical tone, it was clear that he didn't think it was a problem.

"If people don't know, they can't complain. If they don't know about his Aura, they'd have no way to know how Giovanni died. It sounds like science-fiction, even to me. I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it," the Master said. "Besides, it's not like Ash is a psychopath that will hurt people if we just ignore this. He's not a danger to anyone." He paused. "Well, he could be, but it's not in his personality."

"I'll agree with you on that one." Lance nodded his head, and suddenly looked very reluctant to talk. "There's one more thing...about Green..."

Red sighed, remorse crossing his features. "There's not really much to say. She finally felt alive again in the last few months of her life. She gave her life for her daughter's. She'll be honoured... and missed." Amanda Green had been Red's last link to the past, his last link to Blue. Delia pushed away the past, and he wouldn't exactly say she was a friendly face to have conversations with anyway. He had burned that bridge a long time ago. Lance was as close as he could get, but it wasn't the same.

The black-haired man shook his head and stood up. "Come on. We've got a lot of work to do if we're going to pull this off."

...

May bounced nervously from foot to foot, eyes darting up at every person who walked down the ramp from the ferry. Beside her, Max scoffed slightly, trying to make himself seem like the more mature of the two, but the reality was, he was just as excited and anxious.

Routes between Regions had finally opened up again, but only for those searching for family members at the moment. Everyone was trying desperately to catalogue who was still alive and who had been lost.

That's why the two of them stood anxiously in the Vermillion City port, a League escort not far behind them, minding his own business. One thing it was agreed upon was that none of 'the kids,' as they were always referred to (much to everyone's annoyance), were going to go on their own without adult supervision.

Max couldn't blame them, but that didn't mean he was happy with having a shadow the entire train trip there (thankfully Kanto's rail system was still up and running just fine).

His sister was looking towards the end of the ship, when something caught Max's eyes. They widened, and with one hand, he grabbed May's arm to shake it. The other flew into the air, waving wildly. "Dad! Mom!"

May's head snapped around just in time to see Caroline and Norman rushing towards them. She instantly broke into tears as she hurried forward, meeting her mother half-way in a tight hug. Beside them, Norman heaved Max off of the floor entirely.

"I was so scared something happened to you," May choked out.

"Me? Oh May, I was worried about you," Caroline said, taking a step back to look at her daughter's face. She ran a hand over her cheek. "My brave girl. I'm so proud of you." Her eyes drifted over to Max, and she reached out her free hand. "Both of you."

Norman moved closer, still holding Max, wrapping his other arm around May, and Caroline, the

whole family holding each other close.

Opening her eyes, May saw something move behind her mother. She blinked at the sight of the green hair, and inhaled sharply. Caroline let her go, and willingly let her step away.

Blue eyes met green, and May could hear her heart pounding into her ears as she took a couple steps towards Drew.

He was leaning on a crutch, eyeing her as if he was making sure that she was real and not an illusion. She probably looked the same.

May couldn't stop herself from shaking as she choked out, "You're an idiot." She walked towards him until they were only a couple feet apart.

"I'm sorry," Drew answered, surprising her a bit. He shifted, looking rather uncomfortable on the crutch that he was leaning on. He followed her gaze and shrugged. "I can't walk without it right now. I'll probably get some kind of brace for my leg later to help with it. Not a bad trade off, all things considered." He made himself sound so cocky and sure about it, as if he had chosen that. His eyes drifted down to her wrist, and he blinked with surprise. "You got your bracelet back."

May looked down at it, then at him again like he was the single strangest thing that she had ever seen. Everything rushed back to her all at once, all the sadness, heartbreak, anger, pain, and everything in between. She started crying again and threw herself at him, hugging him tightly.

Drew was startled, letting his crutch fall, but May kept him upright. Slowly, he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her back, closing his eyes when he felt her cheek press against his.

Behind them, Max muttered an, "Ew." His parents both laughed heartedly. Everything was going to be alright.

...

Brock stared up at the ruins of the Pewter City Gym with a stoic, stern expression. Though most of Pewter City in general was untouched the gym had been destroyed to make a point. The once great stone sign and roof were nothing but boulders.

It wouldn't be hard to fix, Brock already knew that, not with their powerful rock, ground, and steel-type Pokémon. The problem was that he wasn't sure what he wanted to do with it. Sure, Forrest was the official Gym Leader right now, but their father had owned the gym. Now that ownership fell to him before his younger siblings. He didn't want them to see it like this.

He walked forward, running a hand over one of the engraved rocks that had once been the sign. Brock remembered when the original one had been destroyed in a rough battle when he was young. He remembered his father painstakingly carving out a new sign since their League Inspection was coming up incredibly soon and they needed to have the name of the gym advertised.

Brock remembered his pregnant mother (then again, most childhood memories that involved her, she was pregnant) laughing hysterically at how bad it was. Though Brock felt sad it was gone now, he could admit that it had always been bad.

"Brock?" The young man broke out of his thoughts as he looked around, blinking with surprise as Lucy approached him. She stepped over a few large rocks, before coming to a stop beside him and staring at the ruins of the sign he was touching. She stared at him with worried red eyes.

He crossed his arms in front of him. "Forrest told the others that we'd make a memorial for them in

the gym. They're arguing over whether it should be rock or something with water, since that's what mom loved."

"That's a nice idea," Lucy said with a slight nod. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Brock took a deep breath and looked back at her. "You saved my brothers and sisters. You helped take care of them when I couldn't. I owe you so much already."

"You owe me nothing." At his stubborn look, she smiled slightly. "Well, maybe a homemade meal sometime?" She seemed almost shy for a moment. "Things won't go back to normal anytime soon, no matter what the league says, but you know, if you need someone to talk to, I'm here, right?" She shook her head, red eyes staring at him with worry. "You're allowed to grieve too, you know?"

A wave of sadness rushed over him and he sighed heavily. "I know. Thank you. I just...not yet."

"You don't have to put anyone else first. Not even your siblings. We're all here to help you with that," she assured him. "Besides, they've grown on me."

Brock chuckled at that but shook his head, his smile twisting into a sad one. "It's not that. It's more...I feel like this should have made me think differently about them. My parents. They saved my brothers and sisters. They died. In that moment, they were the best parents in the world, but..." he hesitated. "They were still shitty parents." Brock almost felt mortified when he realized exactly what he said. That was a thought he had kept to himself for a long time.

"Maybe they were. Them dying doesn't change that, and you shouldn't be ashamed of the way you feel," Lucy assured him. "But I can understand why you'd want to keep that to yourself around your siblings." She reached out and grabbed his non-injured hand. "But if you need to vent, I'll be here."

A small, genuine smile passed over his features as his fingers curled around hers. "I know."

...

Cilan tapped the desk in front of him nervously, waiting for the connection to take hold. There were many communication stations erected in the Indigo Plateau, for those who were trying to get a hold of relatives in other regions. Travel was still limited in some cases (Unova and Kalos were much too far at the moment to connect to at the moment), but slowly, people were being reunited.

It had taken him a little while, but he had been given the information, and hoped desperately it was right.

Suddenly, the panic hit him hard. He scrambled back away from the phone until he felt a warm hand on his shoulder. Without looking back, Cilan said, "What if the info was wrong?"

Iris blinked at him with her large brown eyes before shaking her head. "I don't think so. Hilda insisted that Benga said Alder confirmed it was true."

"That story does not instill any confidence into me at all," Cilan replied dryly. He let out a meep as the call connected and completely launched himself away from the phone as if it had attacked him.

"Really?" Iris sighed and shook her head, staring at the screen. Her lips spread into a smile and she said, "Your brother is still a spaz."

Cilan heard the deliciously familiar laughter coming from the screen, and scrambled back so that he could see. Almost instantly, tears welled up within his eyes as Chili and Cress came into view. For their part, his brothers looked just as emotional as he felt.

"Cilan!" They both cried out, indeed sounding just as overwhelmed as he felt. Both started rhyming off question after question, and he could barely keep up with them.

Iris took a couple steps back, a smile spreading across her lips. She wanted to fix what was broken, both Pokémon and people, and this was a perfect place to start.

...

"I'll be fine, I promise," Dawn assured Zoey once again, sitting in front of a phone.

Zoey bit her lip nervously as she stared at her friend through the video screen. "Are you *sure* sure? I mean, Barry's dad is a Frontier Brain. I'm sure he could get us over there. Lucas and Kenny are worried too."

Dawn's lips tipped up into a smile. She had so much to tell Zoey and everyone else about when she next saw them, but she was keeping most of it to herself for now. Her hands curled into fists slightly.

"My mom's here. Ash, Brock, Misty, May, and everyone else are here too. I'll be okay," Dawn said happily. "No need to worry." There were many reasons to worry, but she didn't want to worry her friend too much. Not right now. Dawn already knew she was going to get an earful from her friends about her hands and not telling them the facts that Pokémon Master Red was her father and Ash was her half-brother.

It was still mind-boggling to her, so she wanted time to process it all herself.

Zoey's expression softened. "Alright. Well, if you need anything, let one of us know, okay?"

"I will and—is that Paul?" Dawn blinked at something she saw moving behind Zoey's head.

The redhead twisted slightly and nodded. "Yeah. He was actually a huge help in Sinnoh. He fought just as hard as Cynthia did after you guys left. She was impressed. He hasn't been as big of a jerk. I mean, he still is one," Zoey clarified quickly. "Just not as big of one."

Dawn bit her lip for a moment before asking, "Do you think I could talk to him?"

Zoey looked almost offended that she wanted to talk to Paul, but they had been on the phone for a while now, so she nodded her head. "Wait one second." Zoey twisted around and hurried away. Dawn would have sworn that she heard some off-screen arguing, and a couple people passing by looked at the screen curiously, but a moment later, Paul himself came into view.

He eyed the screen almost warily before sitting down. "What?"

Dawn wanted to fume at his rudeness, and that just made a small smile split across her face. It was such a deliciously normal feeling. "I just wanted to say hi. Uh...I'm alive and I'm glad you're alive?" She realized a moment later who she was talking to, and her cheeks went red. "Sorry! I mean...Reggie...how..."

"He's alive," Paul answered simply, and Dawn felt so much relief hit her. "He's paralyzed though. He won't be able to walk again, or have kids or anything like that. He's...surprisingly okay with that." He seemed a bit puzzled and offended by this.

Dawn understood though. Reggie was alive. He could still take care of his Pokémon despite being paralyzed, and who needed to have kids when there were so many great ones in the world that could be adopted? Probably even more now than before.

"I'm glad," she replied.

Paul hesitated for a moment before saying, "I'm glad to see you're okay. How is everyone else?"

"Alive," Dawn answered. She didn't know what to say. Everyone was in a tiny bit of a euphoric high right now because everything was suddenly okay again. They had been warned by a League sanctioned therapist that the pain, loss, and stress of what happened would probably hit them all at different times and in different ways.

Suddenly, Dawn felt the urge to talk. She had no idea why, since she didn't want to talk to Zoey, Barry, Kenny, or Lucas about what had happened. She didn't want to talk to her mother yet either. She opened her mouth a couple times, and he sat patiently. She realized that he was waiting for her to talk, and felt a surge of gratefulness rush through her.

"I met Giovanni himself. He took me and Ash to use against Master Red. You know who that is, right?"

"Of course I do." Paul's brow furrowed. "Why take you and Ketchum though?"

"He's our father," Dawn blurted out. "Both of ours. He even admitted it, and so did my mom." Lord help her why was she telling Paul this? "Giovanni was going to torture us to get information out of Red and Red was going to let him shove my hands in acid but Ash managed to get out and I kicked people to get away but then I tripped and my hands fell in it anyway." She lifted her gloved hands up, a sad frown on her face. "It's hideous."

Again, why was she telling Paul this?

The boy eyed her for a moment before saying, "Show me."

"What?" She blinked at him.

"Your hands. Show me what they look like." Dawn hesitated, and he said, "I won't make fun of you. There's...no need to worry."

For a brief moment, she gaped at him, before a weak, airy laugh escaped her throat. Slowly she took off the gloves Leaf had given her, grimacing at the ugly bumps and scars along her hands. They were still red, pink and white in various splotchy shapes and patterns. She was told not to keep bandages on them anymore, but that didn't mean that she wanted to see them.

Paul stared at her with narrow, silver eyes that were almost eerie in contrast with his hair and skin tone. Slowly, he shook his head and said, "I don't see the problem."

"What?" She asked again, completely confused by this. Most people who had seen the scars started going on about how sorry they were or how painful it must have been. She would have even understood if Paul said that she was stupid or just walked away after everything that happened.

"Your dad is apparently a douche. Your brother is a powerful, infuriatingly optimistic kid. You got some scars on your hands that are proof that you did more than just sit around and help. If people judge you for them, fuck 'em," Paul explained as if it was the simplest thing in the world. "You don't owe anyone else anything."

Maybe he was speaking for himself. Maybe he was speaking for Ash and all of her other friends too, Dawn didn't know. What she did know was that her heart started to feel a bit lighter. "You know, you're right. Thank you, Paul."

He nodded his head slightly. "I'll see you around sometime."

"Count on it!"

...

"How do you feel?" Clemont blinked up at Serena, who stood beside him briefly before sitting at his side.

"A bit sore, but I'll be okay," he assured her with a smile. He looked around the arena they were sitting in, having come early so they could get good seats. His father didn't want him straining himself by climbing a lot of stairs, and they had been offered really good seats. "It's funny, isn't it? We were in an arena when this whole mess started."

"That feels like years ago," she admitted. "I feel like a completely different person now."

"Me too," Clemont agreed, leaning back slightly. "At least this time I know where Bonnie is." He caught her questioning expression. "With my dad. Where's your mom?"

"Helping Mrs. Ketchum with the rest of the food for when this is over," Serena explained. "I told her I wanted to come early to sit with you guys."

Clemont nodded and the two fell into a comfortable silence as they watched other people slowly mill into the arena. He doubted that most of them even had an inkling as to what actually happened.

"What are you going to do after this?" Serena asked suddenly, startling him.

"Well, I guess...maybe go back home," Clemont admitted. "I don't know...I just..." He shrugged.

"I want to go home. I want to start participating in Performances again, to reach my dreams, since they're still mine, right? That's what we fought for in the first place." Serena twisted her fingers around the hem of her skirt. "But...that kind of feels like running away too. I feel like I need to help for a little bit. Fix some of the damage." Her voice turned bitter. "You know, since Arceus didn't."

Arceus had destroyed the complete Mirage infrastructure worldwide in seconds. Fast and quick enough that it was like a dream or a nightmare. There was no proof it even existed anymore. It was probably for the best, so it couldn't be replicated, but it was still unnerving. The worse thing was that he hadn't really fixed anything that had been destroyed. Cities were still in ruins; lives were still lost.

Clemont knew now that Arceus had never intended on fixing what had happened. He just wanted to stop Team Rocket from destroying the world. He remembered Lugia's bitter words about how they had already failed, and maybe this was a punishment for them, to see exactly how much they had failed.

"Well, maybe you can do both," he offered, and she stared at him with interest. "Help for a while around here. Maybe Cerulean? Then go home and help spread awareness to get more help. Kalos got out of this whole thing pretty much unscathed." He tapped his fingers against his legs. "I think I'd like to help a bit too in Cerulean, or Pewter." Places where they knew people.

Serena stared at him, and without warning, she leaned forward and kissed his cheek. Clemont's face turned bright red and he spluttered a bit, while she just laughed. "Thanks."

"Uh—sure. No problem." His voice pitched, causing her to laugh again.

"Big brother! I—oh! Serena!" Bonnie flew down the stairs, eyes wide with excitement as she hurried to the two blonds, Meyer trailing behind her. "Are you going to sit with us?" She eyed her brother, suddenly suspicious. "Are you okay? Do you need sunscreen?"

Clemont chuckled breathlessly at his sister, who had become overprotective lately. "I'm fine Bonnie. Everything's fine."

...

Leaf stared at the picture on the wall with pursed lips, positive that it hadn't been in the Indigo Plateau, at least not in such a prominent place, before. Then again, it had undergone some quick repairs in preparation for this day.

Announcements and a memorial all in one. Red was, if anything, efficient. She would give him that.

Her eyes focused back on the picture. It was old and frayed, of her mother, Red, Blue, and Yellow, though unless someone knew her, it would be impossible to link Delia Ketchum to the latter of the group. They were standing by a fence, Professor Oak's ranch in the background. She had played on that same fence many times when she was younger.

It was strange to see her mother so young, probably close to the same age Leaf was now. It was her, and Leaf could barely recognize her as the woman she would later be, despite the fact that she hadn't changed all that much in appearance.

Instead, she found it similar to when she looked in the mirror. There was that spark, that happiness that she knew she had.

Leaf's shoulders slumped slightly, and a sad smile appeared on her face as she reached up and traced her hand over her mother's face.

"Hey." She looked up as Gary came over. Professor Oak wasn't far away, talking to someone else. The old man had been a bit reluctant to let his grandson out of his sight since he got back.

"Hey," Leaf replied and looked back at the picture. Gary's reflection joined hers in the glass as his eyes locked onto the younger version of his long deceased father.

"They look so alive and happy," he noted with a sad smile.

"Too bad that changed," she said with a scowl.

"You know, it did, but...I don't think it was as dark as it seems from just the perspective we were given," Gary said with a small shrug. At her raised eyebrow, he blushed slightly from embarrassment. "I was talking to Gramps about dad. My dad was happy with my mom. He was happy with his job and his life. Red was happy as he could be as the Master. Delia was – is happy. Your mom did love you no matter what, you know that now." He looked away from her and at the picture. "Still, they had less to deal with than us, and they did come out worse on the other end. We were lucky."

"Maybe," she settled on. "I just...I hated her, you know? Well, maybe not hate, but I resented her for the longest time. I couldn't let it go." She shook her head. "I really am like her, aren't I?"

Looking down at her, Gary realized that she sounded wistful, not resentful. She was also waiting

for an answer to the question, even though he thought it was rhetorical. Thinking briefly, he decided to go with the truth. "You are. But you don't have to share her fate, because you're not her, are you?"

Leaf nodded her head. "You know...I think...I think I really am okay with that."

Gary put a hand on Leaf's shoulder. He stared at the picture before saying, "You know, she and Red both told me that my dad would be proud of me. I think...I think that's what I wanted. Why I came along. To be the type of friend that would make my parents proud. So, if you can be okay with that, I think I can be okay with letting them go too."

Leaf smiled at him sadly, and leaned her head on his shoulder, her hand squeezing his tightly.

...

A large crowd had been invited to the Indigo Plateau. News stations, magazines, and blogs were amongst those present, and there were cameras everywhere. It was almost amusing to see Jessie, James, and Meowth fall into their old disguises of camera man, sound mixer, and reporter, despite the high security. It wasn't just media though, there were politicians, there were Gym Leaders, there were Frontier Brains, there were Masters, there were Elites, and there were Champions.

Though they all kept straight faces, Ash could feel the annoyance rolling off of them. That came as no surprise. They probably wanted to be in their own regions, actively helping the reconstruction there.

He shifted, Pikachu moving in sync with him so that he wouldn't fall off. They were standing in what was normally a battle arena within the Indigo Plateau. Ash felt his stomach twist when he realized that it very well could have been this arena that he had faced, and been defeated by, Ritchie.

As he looked around, Ash caught sight of various faces that he knew, and was fairly surprised by just how many people he did know. Nausea rolled over him as he realized just how many people he knew that weren't there anymore. People that should have been standing amongst the trainers that had been invited, or could reach the Indigo Plateau in time.

Kidd Summers should have been there, talking about her daring fight against Team Rocket. Riley should have been there, silently taking in everyone around him with his Aura. Sheena and Kevin should have been there to give their input on Arceus. That barely even scratched the surface of the people that just weren't there anymore.

His eyes fell on the stands, where Clemont, Serena, and Bonnie were sitting together with Meyer and Grace, all speaking enthusiastically. A wave of affection hit him, and a small smile appeared on Ash's face. The three of them had been there in the very beginning when everything had gone topsy-turvy on them all. He was so thankful, and so proud of them too.

Ash's heart leapt when he saw Max with Norman and Caroline, too far away for him to bother yelling at them, but still close enough to see. Max was smiling and talking to his parents. What really warmed Ash was when May appeared behind them, walking slowly beside Drew, who was using a crutch. He might not have been able to walk, but seeing him alive was what mattered.

Pikachu suddenly tugged on Ash's hair gently, and pointed at something. "Pikachu pi ka pi cha pika."

Leaning back slightly, Ash looked at where his best friend was pointing, and his smile grew when

he saw Brock with all his siblings. They had lost their parents, but all of them were putting a strong façade forward. No, it wasn't really a façade. They were strong together. Brock caught his eye, and Ash raised an eyebrow slightly at the fact that Brock was holding Lucy's hand. His friend blushed slightly and shrugged.

"Hey!"

Ash yelped and jumped, whipping around to stare at Dawn with wide eyes. She laughed merrily, and it was a beautiful sound.

Calming his racing heart and Aura, he scowled at her. "You're taking this annoying younger sibling thing way too seriously."

"I do what I can," she said, practically preening. Piplup nodded his head from by her feet.

"There you two are," Johanna said as she pushed through the crowd. "We've been looking for you. The ceremony should be starting soon."

"I swear, young man," Delia added as she seemed to magically appear beside Dawn's mother, "I am going to put a tracker on you one of these days."

Staring at his mother with bemusement, Ash said, "You had to take the tracker off of my Pokédex when I was 16." Meaning she legally wasn't allowed to do that.

"Oh, if I ever do, you won't know." Right, his mother could be ruthless when she wanted to be. That was something he had always known, but it was even more obvious now that Ash knew more about her past.

Johanna chuckled a bit. It was heartening for both Ash and Dawn to see their mothers get along so well. Then again, neither one of them had done anything wrong.

"Is it petty of me to hope seeing your mom and my mom together will unsettle Red?" Dawn whispered to Ash. He just snorted in reply. Honestly, he kind of hoped the same thing.

"Oh, Sam! There you are!" Delia called out to Professor Oak, the crowd practically parting for him to pass, Gary and Leaf trailing behind him. "Are you sure you don't want to sit in the stands?"

"I asked him the same thing," Gary answered before his grandfather could.

"Oh don't worry about this old geezer," Professor Oak assured them. "He's still got quite a few years kicking in him. Standing for a few minutes won't hurt." He clasped a hand on Gary's shoulder.

Delia scooted a little closer to Leaf, touching her arm. "You look a little peaky. You'll have to stop by the house when we get back to Pallet." Upon the revelation that Amanda had died saving her daughter, Delia had practically adopted Leaf on the spot.

Ash had apparently gained two sisters, and he wasn't sure how happy he was with that.

Leaf smiled slightly and nodded her head. "That'd be nice, Mrs. K." She glanced towards Ash, the bashfulness instantly vanishing as she raised an eyebrow. "Where's your better half? And no, I don't mean Pikachu." Pikachu sighed dramatically at this. "Okay, his better human half. Better?" Pikachu nodded. Dawn, Johanna, Delia, and Gary all laughed. Professor Oak tried to hide his smile (unsuccessfully). Leaf just looked smug.

"Traitor," Ash muttered, nudging the Pokémon gently with his knuckle. He gave Leaf an unimpressed look and nodded towards the stands. "I saw her over there with Tracey and her sisters." He pointed to prove his point, and was slightly surprised to see Iris and Cilan talking with them, but no Misty in sight. "Uh, or she was."

A brief flash of panic rushed through him, but it faded as a familiar Aura drew near, and a hand wrapped around his. His shoulders slumped just slightly, but Misty chose to ignore it. He didn't want to come across as possessive or anything like that, since Ash knew Misty could take care of herself with ease, but that didn't stop him from worrying. She had been dying in his arms.

He visibly flinched at the memory, and almost threw up right then and there. Saving Misty was worth it, but what he had to do in exchange still didn't sit well with him. It never would. He was glad that she hadn't brought it up around anyone else, only to let him talk about it. Misty was awesome that way.

Whispers erupted around them and Ash looked up as Master Red himself approached the podium on the stage. He could understand why this had so many people instantly gossiping. Red was known for being reclusive and very short interviews in the occasional moment someone did manage to catch him when he was away from Mt. Silver.

An announcement from him was something that they hadn't seen in a long time.

Red looked surprisingly like himself, not dressed up like some others were. He kept his clothes casual, looking every bit like a traveling trainer. Ash tugged slightly at his own white collar, realizing that his simple blue and white over-shirt looked a lot like Red's white and red one.

Scarlet eyes stared everyone down, before the man spoke into the microphone. Ash blinked a bit surprised that it didn't sound nearly as scratchy as it had before. Then again, there had been time for his vocal cords to heal.

"My name is Master Red. As many of you know, Team Rocket worked a trans-regional coup with other region-based crime syndicates. This turned bloody and violent, and for a while, it appeared that we were losing." He paused and looked around. Everyone was completely silent, even the media representatives that were invited. Ash had to wonder where he was going with all of this.

"Instead of fighting head on, we chose a route that we hoped would take them by surprise. We sought the help of Arceus, and he bequeathed it upon us after we proved our worth. It is not easy to sway a God. He deemed humanity worth saving, and he deemed the Pokémon League worthy of being the ones to save it."

"What?" Gary hissed from close by. Leaf's eyes narrowed, and Misty's hand squeezed Ash's tightly. His brow furrowed, and Ash quickly looked around, catching sight of his friends in turn. All of them looked completely unimpressed.

They had known that the League was going to keep their involvement quiet, but this was even taking the real credit from Arceus and giving it to themselves.

"In the meantime, we were pitted against the very Pokémon that shaped and protect our world – thinking that they were destroying us when it was really cleverly disguised fakes. Real, normal Pokémon illusioned to appear like the legends. We were divided. We were hunted. We were almost destroyed. However, we weren't. We grew stronger and wiser until we could strike back. At our weakest, we were stronger than them."

"Not talking about Mirage Pokémon does make sense," Leaf said in a low voice. "But still, what

the hell?" Gary shrugged, but he looked about as impressed as she sounded.

"We have not fallen. We have not been broken apart. We will persevere on and prove that we are stronger than they give us credit for. That is why we will be holding Pokémon League tournaments in all regions in the upcoming year."

"What?" Though said in many different ways, that seemed to be the sentiment from everyone present. Pikachu even squeaked with surprise, and Dawn covered her mouth with her hand.

Misty inhaled sharply beside Ash, who looked over at him. Her sea-green eyes were narrowed.

"How the hell does he expect us to get our gym up and running in time to let people challenge it to compete in a league tournament?"

"They're trying to bury this," Gary said with a grimace. "They're probably hoping that acting like nothing happened will eventually make things go back to the way they were."

"But it can't," Leaf said, stating what they already knew. "If it goes back to the way it was, it'll happen again. You all know it will."

Misty opened her mouth to reply to that, but Lance stepped up to the podium, holding up his hand to catch everyone's attention.

"There will be several different programs in place to help cities, gyms, and trainers. For example, there will be a program that any trainer willing to help repair a city will be offered free boarding in exchange," Lance explained. "We have several experts here to explain the different programs to all of you."

"Okay, it might seem insensitive," Gary noted as they listened to people talk about the different league ideas, "but it's actually pretty smart. Trainers traveling through cities will generate more profits in those places. Boosts the economy."

"Sounds desperate to me," Leaf said with a snort. "Please tell me I'm not the only one that sees that."

Ash narrowed his eyes slightly. He glanced at the three that were with him, before looking around the crowd to lock eyes with all of his other friends one at a time. None looked too pleased.

Red spoke up again. "Let us not forget the Pokémon that have suffered as much as us – if not more. In some cases, their world, their habitats have been completely changed. I myself was taken captive by them willingly to allow my Pokémon time to escape, and to destroy some sensitive information that would have put many more lives in danger. My Pokémon, my people, were more important than myself. We cannot forget those who have perished. I would ask everyone to stand in a moment of silence."

The silence that fell in the stadium was almost deafening, and it made Ash feel like he could hear every thump of his heart and light inhale of his breath. They were lying about what happened in a way that was unacceptable, lying in a way that made the sacrifices that everyone made seem less important than they were.

He didn't want credit for what he did, and Ash knew that his friends didn't want it either. None of them wanted to be hounded by media for their involvement, so not giving names would have been great, but completely changing the story was something else all together.

Ash looked down at Dawn, who looked back with a frown on her face. He then leaned back slightly to look at Gary, whose brow was furrowed, and Leaf, who was eyeing Red thoughtfully.

Turning slightly, he watched Max's eyebrows shoot up with surprise as Drew raised a single eyebrow and May's hands curled into fists. He looked back towards the stands, where Brock was sitting with his family and Lucy, not looking surprised at all. A quick glance towards where the Waterflowers and Tracey were showed something similar. In fact, Tracey looked almost downtrodden but not surprised. Ash twisted slightly so that he could see Bonnie, Clemont, and Serena. Bonnie's eyebrows were pinched in confusion, Clemont stared with narrowed, thoughtful eyes, and Serena just looked downright offended.

Turning back around, Ash caught sight of his mother, who was frowning fiercely. He felt Misty shift close to him, resting her head on his shoulder and squeezing his hand. Though he didn't look down at her, he could feel how upset she was. He could feel how upset his friends were.

No, Ash realized as he looked around. It wasn't just his friends. There were so many people around him that were upset. Some for their lost loved ones, some for simply the events that had occurred, but still, some were unhappy with Red, with the decisions that the Pokémon League was making.

"We were foolish to think it was over, that we could hide from it all."

Ash looked at each of the Champions standing dutifully around Red, all standing tall and silent out of respect for the people and Pokémon that would perish. The people and Pokémon that would be forgotten if they got their way.

"Maybe we didn't want to see it."

He looked down at his feet, his mother's words from before echoing through his mind, the feelings of all the trainers and Pokémon around him washing over him.

"I guess...the peaceful times make us blind."

Lance started speaking again, but Ash didn't hear a word that he said.

"Let's make a promise."

Eyes closed, Ritchie's words echoing in his mind, Ash squeezed Misty's hand and muttered, "I'm going to help in Cerulean City, but that's not the only thing I'm going to do. I'm going to train like never before. I'm going to fight in the Kanto League."

"Then what?" Misty whispered, keeping her voice down, though she was aware that Dawn, Gary, Leaf, Delia, Professor Oak, and Johanna were listening to them.

"We won't stop, and some day, we'll face each other for the title..."

Ash clasped his hand into a fist over his heart, eyes snapping open as he looked directly at Red. The man in question blinked and looked down at him with crimson eyes that become slightly surprised and confused, until understanding passed over them.

"...no matter who gets there first."

"Pikapi?" Pikachu whispered.

Ash felt a fierce determination that had been missing for so long now. Confusion gave way to absolute clarity. Giovanni's greed was not the only reason why everything became as messed up as it had. The Pokémon League had changed once out of necessity, but it didn't work anymore, and something needed to change. None of the Champions, not even those who seemed displeased, were going to step up to make those changes themselves.

As he stared at Red, Ash knew that *he* knew exactly what was going through his mind.

He pictured his friends in his head. They needed someone to protect them, and he wasn't about to let anyone else down. That was his choice.

Pikachu shifted on his shoulder, prompting him to answer Misty's question. When he spoke, it was with absolute certainty, as if there were no other options. It was his duty to protect legends from the world, but it was just as equally his duty to protect the world from legends.

Even if those legends weren't Pokémon.

"Then," Ash said, "we're going to change the world again."

-The End-

Chapter End Notes

Written by: Skylight Sparkle

Edited by: EchidnaPower

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



A flash of pink light danced across the clouds as a small Pokémon with soft, pink fur and wide blue eyes appeared. Mew glided effortlessly towards her destination, stopping only when she saw a figure looming over a large hole in the clouds, staring down at the stadium far below. Even if the people below looked up at them, they wouldn't have been seen.

Mew hovered by Arceus for a moment before finally asking, "How do you feel, Father?"

"Hmm," Arceus muttered, sounding almost tired. "Humbled is perhaps the best word for it. Small maybe."

"You knew that you'd never be able to go back to what you once were once you chose to have a mortal form," Mew pointed out, rocking back and forth in the air. "Even with your Mega Stone, as the people call it."

"Yes, that is true. There is no point in regretting decisions long gone by," Arceus agreed. He shifted slightly, red and green eyes glancing back at his first creation. "I am quite proud of my Chosen One."

"He chose the girl over the world," Mew pointed out bluntly.

"Yes, he did, and there's a wondrous strength in that selfishness as well. The girl chose the world, and was rewarded her life for that."

"You could have brought her back without forcing him to kill when he was so openly against it," the little legendary added. "Why did you do it? The others think it was cruel."

"That was his punishment for his insolence, and now I have forgiven him."

"That's not the only reason others are whispering of your cruelty. Of mine," Mew argued. "And you know it. Mewtwo, Giratina, Latias, and Victini seem particularly put-out about it."

Arceus was silent as he watched the people below honour their fallen. He knew that his Chosen One was down there amongst them. "It is true, you were my first Chosen One. You could have easily lifted the orbs, but he needed to learn. It had to be him. He will appreciate it with what lies beyond the horizon."

Though Mew had known Arceus wanted her to stay away from the orbs, he had never given her a reason why. She had given Mewtwo a random declaration of it not being her destiny, but really, she had no clue why she couldn't do it, so she was beyond curious. Mew's eyes snapped towards Arceus, and she visibly frowned. "And what's that?"

Shaking his head, Arceus turned to fly away. "You'll understand soon, child. Do not meddle with the hands of fate."

Mew watched Arceus vanish, leaving only a small trace of cloud and sparks in his wake. She looked back down at the people below, her heart sinking a bit as cheers rose from them.

It was hard to celebrate with them, when she knew that there was still darkness hiding just out of sight.

-The End-

Chapter End Notes

Written by: Skylight Sparkle
Edited by: EchidnaPower

End Notes

From the second I decided to expand my series beyond TMoA, this was my real end goal. The other movies don't impact anything enough for this, since they're all relatively similar to their original forms. While this is technically the sixth instalment (it's officially The Road You Choose Part VI), technically ALL five of my other fics are just one long prequel to this.

If you haven't read them you might be a little confused about certain things. If you want to catch up the order the fics go in is as follows: The Mystery of Aura, The Master of Mirage, Between Time and Space, Distortion and The Harbinger of Life. You might be able to keep up without them, but that's up to you.

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